

Mapping the Waters of Change – A Look at the Undercurrents

In my introductory newsletter, I discussed the challenges of change. As agents of change, this awareness is essential to help us guide others. We are better leaders of diversity when we recognize our own struggles with change. The experience of eliminating an undesirable habit is all too familiar, and few of us are immune from the difficulties of making such changes. In the first issue, I also touched on how feelings of security are often tied to those elements in our lives that are familiar and predictable. In this issue, I will address one of the primary difficulties created by diversity and inclusion: how do we navigate the unpredictable waters of change?

It is perplexing that so many diversity initiatives falter given most people appear willing to espouse objectives that cultivate diversity and inclusion. Is it possible we underestimate the comfort of the familiar and the attraction of maintaining the status quo? We frequently encounter changes – such as detours, rescheduled flights, auto repair appointments, inexperienced customer service workers, and new systems/regulations in the workplace – that disrupt our lives. These can cause discomfort and aggravation, even when we recognize their necessity. This suggests that even when we expect changes to eventually produce constructive outcomes, it does not free us from frustration and discontent.

The oft-applied logic used to build the case for diversity and inclusion gives little credence to common human responses triggered by change and disruption. Instead, we rely on linear logic to drive initiatives with the expectation that anticipated outcomes will steer behavioral changes. This is sensible given linear rationale is simple to understand. Worthy goals such as reflecting the changing demographics of the marketplace and maximizing the talent pool are mantras touted in the corporate arena. There is no disputing we should strive to reach these goals. Unfortunately, “simple to understand” and “easy to follow” do not always correlate. If simple linear logic were the catalyst for most change, it would be easy to persuade people to eat more nutritional food, exercise more, drive at posted speed limits and do more things in moderation. All that would be required is to communicate the high probability of adverse health resulting from current practices. However, we all know this logic alone has limited effect on behavior.

There are deeper, non-linear drivers of behavior we must address – and these drivers are rooted more in our emotions than our logic. This creates a wide range of non-linear behavior and actions that often appears illogical on the surface. Some typical examples: a casual acquaintance asks how they look in their new jacket – you tell them they look good even though you think otherwise; a VIP makes a bad joke in a small group setting – everyone chuckles even though no one finds the joke particularly humorous. In both examples, there are dynamics at play that override the logical (and linear) axiom, “honesty is the best policy”. In such situations, the choice to withhold our real views has been weighed against the risks of sharing them.

Generally, our emotions are influenced by how we feel about ourselves and others, including our perceptions of how others feel about us. The more we have to lose, or similarly, the less we have to gain, contributes to our thoughts and actions. When we feel less secure or equal in relationships, the non-linear examples illustrate how we are less likely to reveal our true thoughts.

By recognizing how change and variation impact our feelings, we can also acknowledge how they affect our regard (and disregard) for others. We accept and cope with change and variation much better when we're feeling positive and secure than when we're feeling negative and insecure. This awareness alone can set us on a different path. How many times have we questioned another's motives and sincerity when we were uncomfortable with their suggestions or changes, especially if they affected our status quo? While judgmental feelings can and do arise, it is important to remember that we are not destined to negative or unconstructive reactions – that this knowledge provides us the freedom to choose another path. This understanding is key to embarking on a new tributary from which diversity and inclusion can flow.

So what do we do along this waterway that has not already been done? What needs to “change” to help us better handle the myriad of adjustments that comes with diversity and inclusion? As I have alluded to earlier, diversity leaders must help others work through challenging feelings and emotions. First, we must remember groups and communities are built on human relationships, relationships that are not always easy. In addition, we must acknowledge that growth in relationships comes from revealing ourselves to one another and personal revelation often makes us feel vulnerable. Accordingly, our feelings are a big determinant of how we relate to one another and cannot be quelled with simple (linear) logic. Consequently, sustainable diversity and inclusion initiatives require strategies that make it safe for us to reveal ourselves to one another, safe to take risks. This is key to navigating change and variation; something not generally accomplished without some level of anxiety.

I will close with a concrete diversity strategy based on these thoughts. One sustainable step that could be applied in a range of business settings is to recognize and honor individuals who nurture diversity and inclusion within the organization. In this case, I am speaking of individuals in operating roles versus those in top management or diversity roles. The frontline champions who take risks to build and foster inclusive groups should be supported and recognized. Furthermore, official recognition ought not be limited to ceremonial awards presented on a periodic basis. It should encompass HR evaluation criteria (including both the interview and review processes), especially for key positions requiring management objectives.

While this sounds simple, it is seldom achieved. Often, upper management and diversity leaders do not acknowledge the risks associated with embracing change and variation. Instead, there is an expectation that individuals will, “do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.” Unfortunately, this dissuades others from taking risks on diversity and inclusion given the customary plate of operating objectives to which they are held accountable. When organizations

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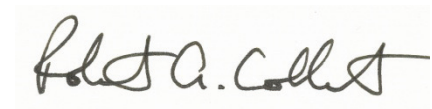
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recognize and reward diversity champions and elevate their status, their mission of diversity and inclusion is more easily recognized as the norm rather than the exception. This encourages those individuals who are risk-adverse to step up their own efforts.

My final thoughts – use of linear methods that rely primarily on motivation, promotion, and cultural/gender training can stimulate, but not sustain, diversity efforts. I have developed a number of guidelines that further sustainable diversity and inclusion objectives of which this issue points to two: 1) allow persons to reveal themselves and their feelings in safe and supportive environments, and 2) counterbalance the unpredictable risks individuals face as they craft diverse and inclusive teams. These two guidelines alone will serve organizations well in their mission to produce a diverse landscape, ... or to follow my theme, a vast oceanscape.

In my April issue, I will tackle form and substance.

Should you have questions or comments regarding this newsletter, please contact me. If you find my thoughts intriguing and would like to hear more about my approach and methods, I welcome your inquiries. If you would like someone added to my distribution list or want to unsubscribe for future additions, please reply to my e-mail address.



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**Presenter and workshop facilitator:**

Robert Colbert has over 30 years of experience in the corporate world. He began his career in public accounting, continued into the private sector of Corporate America, moved into the non-profit sector, and subsequently became a business consultant. During his career, he's had assignments in audit, finance, corporate development, technical sales, marketing and non-profit operations. His educational credentials include a BA from Minnesota State University, Mankato and an MBA from the University of

Minnesota Carlson School of Management. He is also a CPA and holder of a U.S. patent. In addition, he teaches tai chi in the Minneapolis community and currently serves on two non-profit boards: Cammack Marshall Fund for Children, and Freedom Train, Inc. His approach to diversity was developed and honed from experiences he and many others faced during their time in the private and non-profit sectors. His basic premise is that human beings struggle with change and variation; challenges that impede our ability to accept and value one another. To build sustainable diversity, our challenge is to find answers to an overlooked question, "How do we compensate for the human condition as it contends with change and variation."