

Assessing the Environment for Sustainable Diversity

Recently, a representative of a professional organization said its membership was not very diverse and did not think it could draw enough members to seminars on diversity and inclusion. This person further submitted that diversity programs generally have better reception at larger firms with employees from a variety of cultural backgrounds. While these statements contain factual elements, they also evoke deeper thoughts and questions.

Are there virtually no barriers to inclusion encountered by individuals in homogeneous organizations? If barriers do exist, are they significantly less than those faced by women and minorities in heterogeneous organizations? Based upon the mindset above, it would be easy to conclude that barriers to inclusion are non-issues for individuals who mirror the group in power. This viewpoint may be probable, but at closer examination, it is also problematic.

During the civil rights era of the sixties, it was not a simple or safe matter for the average white person to speak out about injustices perpetrated against black people. As long as they suppressed these thoughts, they steered clear of any wrath from whites who preferred the status quo. In southern states, whites who spoke out on civil rights often paid a high price for themselves and their families. Accordingly, for whites who sympathized with blacks, anonymity had greater appeal than notoriety.

Today, coercive dynamics manifest in many political, religious and cultural circles. There is no surprise that these dynamics play out in organizational circles as well. It is common for individuals to face situations where they must decide if, or when, to express personal thoughts and ideas. Their risk of isolation rises when others feel challenged by these thoughts. This is further amplified when the persons who feel challenged also represent the status quo. One differentiator cannot be ignored, however: people who are part of the majority or prevailing culture can remain anonymous more easily than those who are observably different. This fact leads many in minority cultures to look for ways to minimize observable differences – sometimes to their personal detriment. Another fact cannot be overlooked; many in majority cultures face similar dilemmas as well.

When organizations or communities expect members to conform to rigid, and sometimes myopic rules and procedures, diversity and inclusion opportunities are stifled in a corresponding manner. When a person's acceptance is contingent on suppressing thoughts and questions that challenge the status quo, diversity and inclusion suffers. This can be witnessed in groups such as fraternal organizations that practice hazing. In these situations, encounters of individuals who reflect the prevailing culture are eerily similar to encounters of minorities in majority cultures.

These stumbling blocks to diversity and inclusion are too large to be left on the backs of individuals in either majority or minority communities. The weight must be acknowledged and accepted by the collective – especially by those established within the status quo. While

conformance has many benefits, diversity is sustainable only when the collective recognizes and guards against the downsides inherent in efforts to control non-conformance. The mutual benefits are greater when balance is achieved between the collective and the individual. Members who feel valued for their perspectives and contributions are more likely to be engaged in making their organizations and communities successful.

It is important that organizations and communities expand their awareness of diversity and inclusion to embrace the ways in which all individuals are valued and appreciated. When diverse people are simply integrated into environments that promote rigid or regimented ways, the opportunity to cultivate sustainable diversity and inclusion is greatly diminished. Because organizations and communities require rules and procedures to function smoothly, they often sacrifice sensitivity to areas that smother individuality. Organizations and communities attentive to this tendency can better mitigate obstacles to diversity and inclusion.

To expand awareness, organizations and communities must assess their environments. These assessments should not only evaluate current situations and conditions, they should evaluate current trends as well. While understanding current conditions is important, understanding trends is the greater key to determine how specific elements impact diversity and inclusion. The nature of progress is a series of advances and setbacks and at times, it is difficult to detect the direction things are moving. An organization's ability to correlate its diversity and inclusion strategies to actual movements allows for timely course corrections. Consequently, organizations that incorporate trend assessments are better able to fine-tune or scrap initiatives that fall short of goals.

A good gauge that diversity and inclusion is working in organizations is when individuals are free to forgo conformity and anonymity in order to share uncomfortable thoughts and ideas. This type of openness generates creative tension and breaks down staid and obsolete ways that hinder growth. Designing and implementing assessments that further this objective makes all the difference. In the end, this thinking applies to the missions of homogeneous organizations and communities as much as it applies to the missions of heterogeneous ones.

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.



R. Colbert Consulting

**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 the Cleveland Neighborhood Association. 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."