

Why Can't We Depend on the Golden Rule?

Diversity and inclusion would be non-issues if we applied an age-old human rule: treat others the way we want to be treated. This adage, commonly known as the Golden Rule, is lacking in many human encounters. Such simple behavior would address a multitude of human ills. Regrettably, “simple” and “easy” are seldom synonymous when it comes to human solutions.

Most people want to be understood and trusted. If we desire to be treated as such, it seems the Golden Rule could greatly benefit diversity and inclusion strategies. The reality for human beings is that we struggle to treat others as we would ourselves. So, what in the human condition keeps us from fully embracing such a simple rule? This is the real conversation we must have to determine a viable pathway for diversity and inclusion.

There is irony in diversity and inclusion strategies. Many organizational initiatives are predicated on applying the Golden Rule. Organizations execute steps to help people understand and relate to others, with the expectation that greater understanding will translate to sensitivity and empathy. In turn, they anticipate that treatment toward one another will improve. While this is a helpful approach, it is important to question the degree to which sensitivity and empathy are gained from understanding.

Understanding has limitations. Understanding provides new thoughts and perspectives, but not always greater appreciation for others. This is especially germane when others' thoughts and ways conflict with our own. It is only when understanding leads to a shared human connection that significant benefits are realized. When we see ourselves in others, sensitivity and empathy are much more likely.

Even with understanding, there is still a lengthy path toward accepting and valuing others. Understanding does not necessarily kindle trust and confidence. By and large, these elements require time and experience to cultivate – with subjective outcomes. To illustrate this thought, how often have work organizations searched externally to fill positions when internal candidates were available? In these instances, greater trust and confidence were ascribed to external candidates with whom they had little experience or understanding. Accordingly, “known” candidates did not engender ample trust and confidence, elements we generally look for when we decide to include others.

In our society, racism and sexism have been maintained as key barriers to diversity and inclusion. They would be better viewed as dangerous tips of the iceberg and symptoms of the human condition. This becomes more evident when we ask different questions. In a community of Scandinavian men, would the Golden Rule be applied freely among them? In a community of Irish women, would diversity and inclusion be non-issues for them? I could substitute any homogeneous group into these questions and the answers would likely be no.

If we examine our own lives, do we always treat loved ones and friends as we desire to be treated? Are the close-knit groups to which we belong free from problems of selfish parties or undesirable pecking orders?

We expect the best of humanity in homogeneous and close-knit groups. However, at closer look, we recognize interaction and rapport can break down within any group. Even ideal circumstances don't always produce ideal results. Given this, is it realistic to expect heterogeneous groups to bond primarily by understanding each other's differences? More than understanding, it seems greater respect for our shared human dignity is required to withstand inevitable breakdowns.

Recently, there has been much awareness and discussion of bullying. While bullying has its own set of dynamics, there are correlations to issues of diversity and inclusion. Generally, bullies feel threatened and vulnerable – whether real or imagined. Their lens is focused on their own needs and insecurities, with little sensitivity to the interests and welfare of others. Their way of maintaining control is to explode on others, a preferred reaction to imploding on themselves.

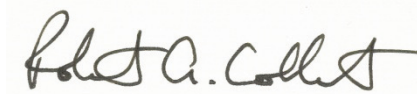
Changes inherent in diversity and inclusion can prompt reactions such as discomfort, insecurity, instability and confusion. If not constructively managed, they generate feelings of vulnerability that cause people to implode or explode. Effective diversity and inclusion strategies are sensitive to human barriers that trigger harmful behavior and thoughtless interaction.

If we are to further diversity and inclusion, we must focus greater attention on underlying human barriers. These barriers keep us from reaching out to others unlike ourselves. When we realize that barriers exist which impact our desire to apply the Golden Rule, we see new problems to address. When we recognize new problems, we have the chance to develop new solutions.

True solutions to diversity and inclusion issues require pushing people beyond their comfort zones while creating a safe space to reach out to others. It's also essential to have everyone from top to bottom engaged in the same strategies and initiatives. Even leaders who are ardent diversity supporters can hinder initiatives in unanticipated ways. With resources at their disposal, leaders can insulate themselves from the personal risks and vulnerabilities that accompany diversity and inclusion. But more importantly, they can exhibit a low tolerance for those who struggle to embrace diversity and inclusion. Without leadership's sensitivity and empathy to natural human resistance to change, any success garnered from diversity and inclusion strategies can be hampered by unrealistic expectations.

Successful diversity leaders provide guidelines and ongoing support to overcome resistance to change and variation. They are pragmatic in their approach – not expecting the Golden Rule to triumph over personal insecurities without continual reinforcement and encouragement. When people feel safe, over time, they welcome the opportunities for growth that come with diversity and change. This is when the Golden Rule can shine through ...

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 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."