

“Can We All Get Along?”

This question, asked by Rodney King on May 1, 1992 amid the Los Angeles riots, was indelibly imprinted in our minds. As many of us remember all too well, these riots were sparked by the trial and acquittal of white police officers who brutally beat King, a 25-year old black male. The March 1991 act that led to charges of police misconduct was caught on videotape and aired by news stations around the world. Most were dumbfounded by what they witnessed on the videotape and the subsequent jury decision that denied excessive force was used.

The acquittal invoked our worse fears of racial prejudice and its effects. It left many people from all walks of life feeling angry and powerless against institutions in our society, in particular, our local law enforcement agencies with the motto, “to protect and serve”.

While Rodney King’s question still commands attention, in this issue I want to explore an ancillary question, “What have we learned from the incident and what can we continue to learn?” My response weighs two pairs of elements: 1) insiders and outsiders, and 2) power and accountability. When in balance with each other, these elements promote strong and inclusive communities. However, when polarized, humanity’s low points are revealed time and again.

Like most people, there are many situations where I see myself as an insider or outsider. They are based on a variety of ways I identify with persons or groups. Most identities are harmless and have little downside (e.g., vocations, hobbies, hair styles, musical preferences). However, when identities are associated with status, station or class, it is common to see pecking orders established (e.g., influential titles, talent leagues, fraternal orders, private memberships).

Associations linked to status, station or class do not necessarily create polarity between insiders and outsiders, yet the ground is fertile for such development. Often, “privileged” insiders receive notoriety for their attitudes or abundance, but this is not the underlying reason polarity exists. Harmful division generally emerges anytime one person or group view themselves as greater or lesser than another.

Whether we view ourselves as insiders or outsiders, it is important to acknowledge we all have power in our lives. However, it is also crucial to distinguish internal and external power. For this discourse, internal power is defined as character and values that express our humanity and responsibility to ourselves and one another. Conversely, external power is defined as control over people and resources, including the ability to accrue and maintain privileges unavailable to others. For many, power is gauged by the external definition. In the context of power and accountability, external power is the power to which I refer, while internal power reflects our personal accountability.

We are aware of the limitations of external power. We can control situations for brief periods, but even with vast resources, we seldom have the ability to maintain lasting control. This is evident in circumstances where the only person we need to manage is our self and we still struggle to attain the things we want or need. How we accept and respond to these situations ultimately reveals our internal power and accountability.

Too often, people or groups in power tolerate others as long as there's no challenge to their power base or status. Once challenges arise, tolerance can quickly dissipate. On the night Rodney King was apprehended after an extended chase, he resisted police officers in ways that challenged their power. More than any physical threat, King's behavior threatened to undermine their power to control him. As the confrontation ensued, the police officers' desire to maintain power overshadowed their concerns for accountability.

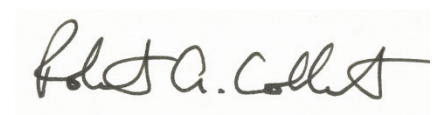
Throughout the King incident, there were power clashes on various levels. The most obvious was a law-breaker attempting to evade arrest and consequences. This alone produces heightened reactions from authorities. King was also a large young man who was uncooperative once apprehended. Per court records, the police officers' escalation of force resulted from their inability to subdue and neutralize a perceived threat. But just as consequential, King was an outsider, a black person with a troubled background. At some point, either prior to or during the incident, police officers sacrificed their ability to view King as someone they could relate to with human dignity. They applied cruel measures to convey to King and each other that he was under their control. From the recorded videotape, it became apparent the officers lost the ability to be accountable for their humanity.

The Rodney King episode and its aftermath provide stark examples of familiar insiders and outsiders in circumstances where power and accountability are out-of-balance. While the King incident was highly visible, less visible incidents happen daily. Such incidents illustrate how common it is for consequences, intended and unintended, to happen to those who disturb the status quo. Historically, disenfranchised persons have encountered imbalances in many forms, one being the glass ceiling. However, others who upset the status quo frequently become targets as well. This is especially evident when whistleblowers with earnest intentions step forward.

As a diversity leader, the more I'm able to shine light on human nature and behaviors, the greater my ability to tackle diversity and inclusion barriers. In this regard, people have been attracted to power for ages, elevating those perceived to have more power and influence while disregarding those perceived to have little power. Just as notably, those with lesser power have repeatedly aligned with the more powerful to receive status and perks, although more often, the overriding appeal has been self-preservation. Accordingly, many outsiders have identified with insiders even though it's unlikely they will ever become part of the inner circle. People have also struggled with accountability, even when their power and access to resources have grown. Diversity and inclusion strategies that acknowledge and address these human challenges are more likely to be sustainable.

As a diversity leader, I think it's essential to counteract imbalances in power and accountability. Until addressed, these imbalances will continue to thwart diversity goals and common-unity. One obvious way to reduce barriers is to widen recognized power circles. But more importantly, we must emphasize accountability on all ends. In organizations and communities, we must promote balance through the cultures we foster – accentuating the value of roles and responsibilities over power and authority. If we bring more focus to these areas, maybe we can all get along someday.

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."