

## Can We Simplify Diversity and Inclusion?

Many advocates maintain that diversity and inclusion (D&I) are simple ideas that offer straightforward solutions. Other advocates insist that D&I are complex ideas with multiple meanings and solutions. Are there truths in both perspectives that can elevate our understanding? This newsletter combines these opposing perspectives: D&I are simple ideas with few easy answers. My hope is this piece will suggest a clearer path toward D&I, without implying the path is easily shortened.

Let's start with two working definitions that anchor this newsletter:

- Diversity embraces differences and prompts change. When diversity is true to its intent, things are not the same as before. If things stay the same, perceptible differences are insubstantial and not synonymous with real diversity.
- Inclusion provides everyone an opportunity to be seen and heard. This suggests every individual has a voice, but does not imply every individual has a say concerning group matters. Influence and say are dictated by group norms and values. Those who have influence and leadership carry power and responsibility within the group. This stems from authority, persuasion or simply the ability to tap into passions.

At minimum, D&I strategies should inspire change and allow every individual to have a voice. It is no coincidence these objectives also foster human relationships. Using them as guideposts, everyone has the opportunity to see themselves in the picture. This includes both "insiders" who have connections or resemblance to the status quo, and "outsiders" who have little or no connections to the status quo. As everyone begins to see benefits from D&I objectives and strategies, the foundation for equitable environments becomes that much stronger.

For D&I to achieve positive outcomes, one core endeavor helps determine success: the ability to nurture relationships with people within our circles and cultivate relationships with people outside our circles. In its simplest terms, D&I are all about relationships. The best strategies encourage constructive human interaction. It is hard to trust people we do not take time to know. With all the assessments, training programs and measurements we use to advance D&I, sometimes this simplicity gets lost. There is no question that achieving measureable D&I results is important, but the overall goal is to achieve sustainable results. This cannot be done unless good relationships are built and maintained. Any D&I headway is quickly eroded when individuals and communities are unable to relate to one another.

One statement has rung true throughout my life and career, “Simple does not always mean easy.” Because real diversity introduces change, D&I strategies must consider human behaviors related to change. Frequently, risk and uncertainty are areas of change we attempt to lessen or avoid. However, we also recognize the benefits of embracing risk and uncertainty for personal growth. This presents a paradox for D&I. When we take risks or expose ourselves to uncertainties, we often feel vulnerable. This can trigger uncomfortable feelings and cause us to pull away from others; the opposite of what we seek to accomplish with D&I. As most psychologists would attest, the ability to be open and vulnerable is key to building relationships, especially with people unlike us.

So how do we overcome challenges and uncomfortable feelings associated with human nature? How do we lead others who struggle to cope with their vulnerabilities? These are major D&I barriers to address. Too often, we only see overt inequities as barriers that need resolution: lack of hiring, poor retention, infrequent promotions, and absence of diverse leaders. However, these are just tips of the iceberg. The sources of human inequities are deep below the surface. A few notable causes: desire for power and control – especially over one’s environment, desire to belong – particularly to the status quo, and fear of exposure or failure. These examples do not encompass all human characteristics that produce inequities. Rather they point to universal human issues that impact every society. This necessitates that we recognize how readily our human logic can be overwhelmed by conflicting emotions when D&I strategies are introduced and implemented.

To keep the big picture in sight, we must continually ask substantive questions such as, “Are we building stronger relationships with others, or are we merely gauging D&I success by measurements and statistics?” This type of questioning helps us recognize strategies that build bridges between dissimilar peoples and those that sow discord. Simply reiterated, D&I outcomes are difficult to sustain without strong relationships.

Some practical ideas to consider in organizations (and communities):

- Apply tools and methods that bring staff together for intentional interactions. Employ exercises that minimize risks of rejection and failure. As an example, icebreaker exercises contain these elements and allow people to ease into being vulnerable with one another. With time, blend in exercises that encourage people to interact at deeper levels.
- Put staff in positions that encourage social interaction. Because of our human desire to belong, most people like to engage with others. Games and participatory exercises are examples that set safe boundaries for interaction and allow people to exchange their thoughts and feelings with one another. Meals or refreshments are always helpful to create more space for connections.

- Apply D&I solutions that benefit all – not simply a few. This does not lessen the need for programs targeted toward underrepresented members of the organization or community. Instead, it heightens requirements to promote and acknowledge benefits in which everyone feels a stake. This means steady engagement between different individuals and groups, with objectives to better value the perspectives and contributions of others and appreciate how everyone benefits from a variety of perspectives.

A generic example of this is when leaders share a set of priorities with members and seek enhancements and implementation ideas. Two D&I objectives are advanced when leaders engage members and allow individual voices to be heard:

- 1) leaders and members gain a better sense for priorities and context, and
- 2) member needs and considerations are better integrated into plans.

The above ideas comprise much more than organizing work or social situations and expecting everyone to interact. Organizations regularly host gatherings, receptions and parties with hopes of building communication, relationships and camaraderie. Typically everyone receives an invite to attend, but too often, few connections occur outside established circles and affinity groups. Because of their makeup, extroverts normally do better than introverts during such gatherings and events. To widen member connections, intentional methods should be used to engage every voice in a shared space.

When one (or more) event activity is based on personal interaction, everyone has an opportunity to benefit and grow. In many settings, what works well is gathering into smaller groups and using applicable queries to stimulate exchange. Queries should be non-threatening but revealing (e.g., what is an important lesson you learned growing up? What has helped or hindered you to be part of the organization?) These activities should spark new or additional connections between individuals. They can be done as stand-alone sessions or breakout sessions within larger gatherings. Again, the objective of intentional interaction activities is to get everyone comfortably engaged in building relationships and sharing their voice.

D&I success will always center on the ability of organizations and communities to invest in relationships. This is a simple idea, but not necessarily an easy one. We must be realistic and recognize that every investment does not payoff as desired. However with quality goals and risk-taking, investments tend to grow. And like many investments, growth compounds as the asset foundation broadens. In a number of organizations I have observed signs and banners with comparable messages for staff members, “You are our greatest asset.” My hope is that we continue to realize how much our collective value compounds when we are assets to one another.

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 corporate experience. He began his career in public accounting, continued into the private sector, moved into the non-profit sector, and subsequently became a business and diversity consultant. During his career, he has 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. Robert currently serves on the board of Cammack Marshall Fund for Children and the finance committee of Youthprise. In addition, he teaches tai chi in the Minneapolis community.



His approach to diversity is informed by his tai chi practice and 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?”