

Is Cultural Training and Education Making a Difference?

My spouse is very involved in racial equity work. Recently, we were discussing cultural competency and racial micro-aggressions. One question I asked, “How does knowledge of micro-aggressions by white people help solve the issues of racism and prejudice?” Her answer was revealing for me, “I feel supported when a white colleague recognizes a situation that has happened to me and others. I feel a little less crazy when situations I’ve shared that were previously invisible to them are now acknowledged.”

What she verbalized was something I could relate to personally. As humans, we all have experienced unsettling moments when we felt alienated or resented for what appeared to be no sound reason. As an African-American, I have faced moments of angst wondering if these incidents happened because of my persona or my skin color. Too many times, an internal question followed that yielded few answers, “Is there something I could have done to remedy the situation?” When my wife used the word “crazy” to explain her feelings, it made so much sense.

My wife’s response added to my appreciation of cultural competency and awareness of micro-aggressions. No matter their background and differences, every individual deserves to be judged on his or her character and makeup. Yet, even with this appreciation, I am skeptical we gain sustained value from cultural competence or awareness of micro-aggressions when they are established as cornerstones of diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts. This newsletter examines the basis for my skepticism.

As co-inhabitants of our world, it is vital we understand diverse cultures and other differences between people. It helps us honor others’ needs, interests and concerns. It also illuminates opportunities and challenges of being different from the mainstream. For mainstream groups, training and education on different cultures and awareness of micro-aggressions can increase understanding and empathy. In addition, mainstream groups derive significant benefits from examining how disregard, ignorance and biases affect other groups and impact their effectiveness within the wider community. These aims drive numerous organizations to make such training and education the centerpiece of their D&I efforts.

However, training for cultural competency and micro-aggressions fall short of bridging gaps between cultures. When utilized as primary D&I strategies, they seldom translate into transformation of mainstream culture. If we take mainstream culture and draw a line between those who are culturally sensitive and those who are not, training outcomes can be starkly different. For those sensitive to cultural issues, training and education simply fortify their thinking and approach. For those who seldom examine D&I issues that come across their radars, training and education alone is unlikely to provide much more than short-term benefits.

By and large, imperceptive people are the ones D&I training and education programs are intended to impact. For this audience, it is hopeful at best to expect newfound awareness to

transform their thinking. It is analogous to attempting to divert the current of a large river toward a tributary. Unless the tributary is widened, most of the current will continue to follow the main branch. In the discipline of physics, it is called the path of least resistance. If cultural awareness is recognized as a tributary of mainstream culture, it is easy to surmise that considerable energy is required to move mainstream culture toward the tributary. For D&I, application of knowledge is the power needed to advance training and education. Awareness and knowledge are simply the first step; action plans and execution must follow. These go further to produce the outcomes sought from D&I strategies.

So what kinds of action plans are required for cultural awareness to establish roots? What elements are needed for plans to stimulate sustainable growth?

The types of plans that support D&I efforts include:

1. Intentional conversations in one-on-one and small group settings

This does not exclude large group-level conversations and interaction. Rather, it ensures one-on-one and small group conversations are essential parts of the mix. Smaller settings help people feel they can share themselves with others with little risk of being rejected by the larger group. The goal is to make it easier for individuals with differences to become acquainted with one another. Smaller groups encourage greater openness while larger groups encourage greater consensus. Both are needed to embrace and manage difficult issues.

2. Ongoing assessments of organizational/community climate

Inclusion is based on people feeling recognized and welcomed. Inclusion also requires that people feel free to bring new ideas to the group and not be summarily excluded; that they are free to make attempts and mistakes as long as they have the ability to learn from them. If the climate or environment hampers these feelings, any diversity achieved is in name only and unsustainable. Ongoing assessments that incorporate these needs can help organizations and communities determine how fertile their environments are for D&I.

3. Recognition and rewards for D&I strategies and efforts

Recognition and rewards are valuable tools to encourage desired behavior. When organizations or communities hold up individuals as models of success, others are likely to emulate similar behavior to achieve success. For D&I efforts, recognition and rewards can lessen the risks of embracing change and variation. They are especially important when organizations are bound to short-term business objectives that at times overshadow longer-term business strategies. Consequently, recognition and rewards are useful to keep D&I on the radar.

The plan elements needed for sustainable D&I growth include:

1. Minimal polarization during forums and activities

The essence of D&I is change and variation. This can inherently amplify gaps between sides. Similarly, interaction between groups with differences can add tension and amplify gaps between sides. This awareness is key to everyone working together. The more polarized a situation, the greater the challenges of bridging gaps. This helps elucidate why it is easier to call out injustice and inequities than to get sides to agree on how to resolve them. Too often, one or more groups are admonished for their weaknesses. Whether the admonished groups are labeled as perpetrators or victims, stigmas makes it difficult for sides to work together for the good of all. Forums and activities that publicly admonish groups frequently polarize conditions and increase D&I challenges.

The ability to explore our human strengths and weaknesses in smaller settings can help reduce polarization and increase shared understanding. The more we can relate to change and variation as individuals, the better our ability to find common ground in combined groups. As suggested earlier, incorporating one-on-one and small group interaction lessens polarization amongst larger groups.

2. Flexibility to adapt D&I approaches to different levels of understanding and needs

A lot of unknowns are generated when people move away from the familiar. For some, this produces feelings of vulnerability akin to those felt during states of chaos. When these feelings are heightened, they become barriers to people coming together. Accordingly, leaders must continually monitor the climate and help individuals feel safe to participate in D&I forums and activities. This requires a degree of flexibility and willingness to adapt approaches as needed. There are no one-size-fits-all programs that cultivate sustainable D&I. Even after early initiatives are implemented, adjustments may be required to reach D&I goals. Change and variation often become choppy waters. The key to navigating these waters is to keep the overall goal in sight: the wider organization or community coming together.

3. Qualitative objectives alongside quantitative objectives

If you have read past newsletters, you recognize this as an ongoing mantra. Qualities such as acceptance, affirmation and cooperation are needed for true inclusion. Objectives that measure and assess these qualities are paramount. This does not suggest quantitative objectives are irrelevant. Rather, qualitative evaluations help assess D&I progress in ways quantitative metrics cannot.

The ability to achieve quantitative objectives such as profits, headcount or test scores does not assure sustainable D&I. A better measure for sustainability is the number of

individuals who feel appreciated for their efforts and contributions. This can only be assessed through qualitative methods that help determine whether organization and community environments are healthy for personal growth and cooperation. If members of organizations and communities feel they are no more than replaceable parts, their desire to take risks and make real differences are quelled. This entrenches sameness and as a consequence, D&I suffers. D&I is more apt to flourish when qualitative and quantitative measures are jointly considered and addressed.

4. Support for those disillusioned with slow-moving D&I efforts

Advocates for D&I often feel the risk and frustration of being lone voices in the wilderness. This can be a vulnerable place; one that suppresses their desire to champion bold initiatives and possibly impacts their health. When they have avenues to share ideas and challenges with supportive leaders and colleagues, their ability to persevere and push for inclusive climates and environments is greatly reinforced.

5. Support for members who struggle with change

As human beings, it is common for us to experience a “feeling-out” stage when introduced to new people and ideas. This is a cautionary period normally overcome with time. However, if we think we stand to lose something as new players enter the game, this can hinder our acceptance of new people and ideas. Accordingly, there should be avenues to share thoughts and work through challenges rather than simply pushing standing members to embrace those who are new. The less threatened people within organizations or communities feel, the greater the chance new members are welcomed and embraced.

The D&I plan types and elements discussed in this newsletter are in no way all-encompassing. Nonetheless, they suggest approaches that generate sustainable D&I results. If your organization or community is using approaches that polarize a large segment of its members, it is unlikely to be sustainable.

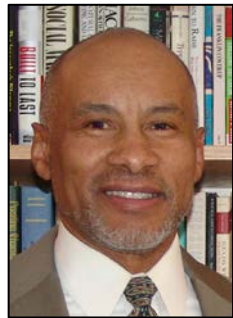
One acknowledged benefit of successful D&I is a greater ability to utilize human resources to their fullest. This is a worthwhile goal and one that many organizations and communities seek to achieve; so much so that fundamental human challenges are sometimes overlooked or dismissed. While cultural competency and micro-aggression awareness cannot be overvalued, it is highly optimistic to think training and education alone will overcome human hesitation with differences. Challenges can only be overcome when D&I approaches include steps that facilitate building individual connections with others. When we keep our eyes on this horizon, we can see that D&I success is rooted in the appreciation of people as individuals as much as members of groups.

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 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 boards of Cammack Marshall Fund for Children, the Cleveland Neighborhood Association 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?”