

Does the Status Quo Embrace Diversity and Inclusion?

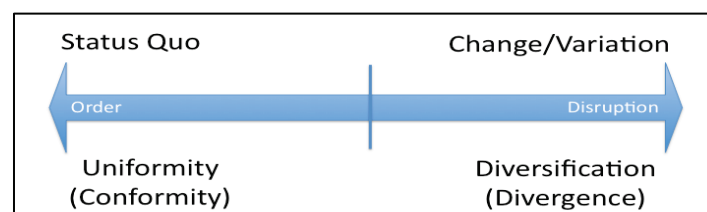
It is easy to imagine elite and powerful individuals or groups when we think of people who represent the status quo. In the United States, it is common to visualize older white men as powerful representatives of the status quo. Conversely, it is not uncommon to depict young, black males as troublemakers and lawbreakers. These attitudes and associated cultural norms are often personified and expressed in various media – from broadcast to social. Because they mask underlying social and economic factors that influence opportunities and outcomes, these personifications allow certain groups to hold privilege and others to be subjected to prejudice.

While many in society reach similar conclusions, there are many others who are not swayed by this logic. This has led me to ask a more philosophical question, “Why do people see the world so differently?” This newsletter was triggered by thoughts on this question. In this piece, I explore the dynamics of status quo in communities and organizations and how diversity and inclusion (D&I) enter into the mix.

Definitions of status quo are useful as a starting point. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines status quo as, “the existing state of affairs.” American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy defines it as, “The existing order of things; present customs, practices, and power relations.” Its Latin origin means, “the state in which.” These definitions suggest “status quo” is often synonymous with power and order.

We must also break down the meaning of the words diversity and inclusion. At its root, the word “diversity” is synonymous with change: different elements have been introduced. By its very nature, change can be disruptive to order and routines that provide stability and comfort, things generally associated with status quo. If we place status quo and change on a continuum, they are portrayed on opposite ends of the spectrum. This indicates the polarizing effects they can have on one another, even while complementing the other.

The word “inclusion” suggests incorporating disparate parts into the whole. One Merriam-Webster definition states, “those who are members of one group or class also become members of the second.” As membership grows, this implies a wider distribution of resources and benefits that are frequently controlled by the status quo in communities and organizations. Accordingly, the desire to share benefits with the whole establishes the levels of member inclusiveness. Inclusion, or the lack thereof, determines the balance or imbalance of status quo and diversity.



Status quo tends to press for uniformity and stability while change tends to foster divergence and disruption (see diagram). Both sides have much to bring to the equation, even when equilibrium between the two is missing. Status quo in society has the ability to maintain norms and procedures that unite efforts. Change within society has the ability to address issues in new and innovative ways, to progress beyond our past. Both are key to growth and prosperity in communities and organizations. When the balance is heavily weighted to either side, effectiveness and efficiency are impaired. Among the common pitfalls: too much status quo can produce stagnation while too much change can create confusion.

Generally, the status quo determines the balance point along the status quo/change continuum that sets the tone for D&I. In most cases, they have the power and authority to do so. This power cannot be overstated in communities and organizations. When the status quo becomes insular, there is a corresponding negative impact on D&I. The abuse of power can lead to upheaval and rebellion, but by this time, so much that promotes healthy balance between status quo and change has been lost or abandoned.

Whether we accept it or not, change is constant and status quo evolves over time. The important question becomes, “Have we learned from our experiences?” If we study history, it appears we still have much to learn regarding human tendency to polarize status quo and change. In our world today, people on both sides of the spectrum are guilty of criticizing and belittling the other. This has led to history repeating itself: a new guard rising up to rectify matters the old guard would not or could not. Rather than merely fixing what is wrong with the status quo, a more essential quest should be improving our human ability to facilitate change. To state the obvious: the greater our ability to adjust to change, the better. This is something easier said than done as this pursuit requires considerable amounts of internal reflection and fortitude to accomplish.

Leaders in communities and organizations are de facto representatives of the status quo. In their roles, they are expected to maintain order and stability. However, they are also responsible for guiding change and transformation. Most leaders acknowledge the challenge of balancing these two polarities. They recognize the high probability of mistakes along the way. One important quality that determines success is their ability to apply lessons learned from past mistakes. Another quality is their ability to determine when to stay involved and when to delegate. When the index for change and transformation is elevated, leaders generally keep close tabs on strategies. This allows them to rectify missteps before they turn into costly issues. Such leadership qualities are especially pertinent to D&I goals and strategies that embody change.

Too often, leaders tout the upsides of D&I, while downplaying the inevitable challenges and complexities. Even diversity champions use similar approaches to get leaders and other representatives of the status quo on board. Because D&I benefits are so significant, this is logical as a means to gain advocates and support. However, this is also problematic. When complexities are minimized, it conveys the sense D&I will happen on its own merit – the notion we can simply give it a good push and watch it gain momentum. While it is important to present

the considerable benefits when building a case for D&I, it is more important to address human needs and motivations that become potential barriers.

Many leaders believe setting and monitoring metrics for diversity and inclusion are the main requirements for D&I success. Once they put these in place, their major role is to ensure D&I strategies stay on track. This may be sufficient to enhance systems and processes, but less so with D&I. A closer model to D&I is leadership succession planning. The goals and strategies of succession planning require significant involvement on the part of leaders and cannot be assessed with metrics alone. Human characteristics and impulses must be considered as well.

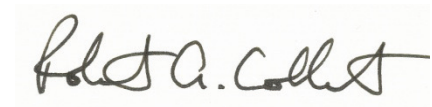
As defined earlier, diversity and inclusion are synonymous with change and variation. Accordingly, feelings of discomfort and angst are commonly produced during periods of change and adaptation. These feelings should not be disregarded. Leaders sensitive to this natural occurrence will have greater success achieving D&I goals. This requires investment and sacrifice in matters that cannot be delegated – an acknowledgment that our ability to facilitate change is much stronger when we recognize how it affects us personally.

The ability to embrace diversity and inclusion is directly related to an appreciation of our personal transformations and lessons learned. Questions leaders and non-leaders alike can ask, “When I have struggled to approach new people and situations, what has allowed me to move beyond this? What has helped me be courageous in new and unknown settings?” These types of questions put everyone in the same human boat, but for leaders who guide the efforts of many, such awareness is invaluable.

In many ways, representatives of the status quo have not embraced diversity and inclusion. This is not necessarily because they choose not to, rather it is because too little attention is given to the polarity between status quo and change. Examining this polarity and achieving a healthy balance is key to achieving D&I goals. Fortunately, our ability to observe natural and complementary polarities is readily available in many aspects of life (e.g., female/male, young/old, urban dwellers/rural dwellers, artists/engineers). It is also something we can examine inside ourselves (e.g., hard/soft, assertive/yielding, concentration/relaxation). As with any polarity, there is continual pull on both sides and creative tension in the middle.

In summation, when two poles are in harmony, there is much greater potential for learning and growth. The ability to reflect on diversity and inclusion with an added perspective on status quo and change provides a much greater opportunity to not only embrace, but also sustain diversity and inclusion.

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."

