

Can Data and Information Turn the Tide?

Recently, a friend and I were discussing the challenges of identifying diversity and inclusion (D&I) barriers and developing sustainable solutions. During our conversation, we especially went back and forth on what data is required to tip the scales toward support of D&I commitments and strategies. As with similar conversations, we both put forth premises about what are lacking, then suggested measures we deemed necessary to overcome D&I barriers. What made our conversation interesting is that we agreed on most issues and challenges, but differed on measures needed to address them. In this newsletter, my goal is to make the case for D&I measures that seldom receive ample attention.

I will begin with my working definition of diversity, a definition seldom applied by others: diversity = change. One root of the word diversity is 'differ'. When things differ, by logical extension, they cannot be the same. When things are not the same, change either is occurring or has occurred. Depending on the magnitude of change, people usually experience corresponding impacts on their human emotions and willingness to take risks.

A simple example of change is when we take vacations. For the most part, we look forward to vacations as opportunities to relax and relieve daily stresses. It is normal to feel excited about upcoming vacations, particularly when they take us far from home or to new places. Excitement, however, is not the only emotion we experience preparing for vacations. Frequently, we also experience a number of stressful moments in our efforts to ensure vacations go as smooth as possible:

- Can we book the best transportation and lodging accommodations to meet our needs?
- How do we pack just enough, but not too much for the trip?
- Given our limited vacation time, how do we stay on schedule (e.g., arrive in time for flight and other reservations)?

When change happens, the feelings we experience are rarely neutral. Whether it's a new work system to learn and use, or simply a revamped parking lot for our vehicle, we can experience a wide range of attraction and repulsion to change. This is particularly germane when changes are imposed on us. Similarly, D&I changes produce a mix of feelings that include the vulnerability of human relationships and interaction:

- Can I easily socialize with the new person/people?
- Will the new person/people and I work well together?
- Will the new person/people help my status within the group?

Our desire to embrace changes, including new or different people, is highly affected by our ability and willingness to adapt to unknowns. For some, this is an innate flexibility that requires little time. For many others, this is an acquired flexibility that requires extended time.

Numerous societies, including ours, adopt the premise that diversity benefits everyone. This thought contains simplicity and wisdom. It affirms how different viewpoints and perspectives can strengthen approaches and decisions. Too often, however, the simplicity of this premise fosters a subsequent notion: because D&I are good for everyone, it should be fairly easy for good people to embrace. For those who hesitate or resist D&I, they are often presumed biased, or at the very least, less enlightened. The main prescription for them is to gain better understanding of their biases and insensitivities and become more compassionate people. While this is a constructive remedy, it is incomplete. Essentially, these presumptions narrow D&I to a simple and logical equation: reduced bias = more inclusive communities.

Unfortunately, this equation ignores barriers that impact human relationships. Feelings of trust and distrust, comfort and discomfort, familiarity and unfamiliarity have much more to do with whom we include and exclude. If we examine our history, there is no question that race, gender, sexual orientation and other differences can amplify these feelings. But, when we take these differences off the table, we find the same underlying feelings exist in all relationships, including family and friends. If we maintain that relationships with others unlike ourselves are heavily influenced by our ability or inability to address biases, this suggests trust, comfort and familiarity are neutral variables to the equation. Looking at our longest-lasting relationships, however, we recognize such feelings carry tremendous weight in our acceptance of others.

During my conversation with my friend, I asked the question, “Is there a tipping point where enough data and information produce understanding and acceptance of others – where people never again question disparities exist?” Looking at many of the D&I strategies and solutions applied today, a lot of practitioners seem to think yes. There is a belief that analysis of differences, inclinations and disparities will improve understanding and sensitivity among peoples. Expressed as a goal and intention, it would read something like this, “If we examine disparities more deeply and recognize their impact on people, we can implement better solutions to close the gaps.”

When human feelings and relationships are disregarded in D&I strategies, data analysis and information reinforce differences and disparities as the primary factors of concern. Ironically, differences and disparities become the defining elements in relationships between different groups. To cultivate real inclusion, steps are needed that increase a person’s ability to see the other through their differences and labels. While it is important to recognize and appreciate all that has shaped and molded an individual, it is also important to realize shared labels do not predispose individuals to think or act the same way. The more we focus exclusively on another’s differences and labels, the less we see the whole person.

Authentic relationships cannot happen without feelings being considered. Such relationships are even more difficult when minimal effort is made to nurture them. The ability to nurture relationships is fundamental to sustainable D&I. Our ability to make discoveries about differences and disparities is extremely helpful to the process, but in the end, can only support

D&I strategies and efforts, not define them. Our main goal should be to create environments and tools that encourage people to overcome feelings of reticence and vulnerability toward one another. This is how we increase opportunities to see and appreciate others in ways that acknowledge the many attributes that make them up – labels and all. This is when D&I truly becomes part of the landscape and allows more people to sit at the table.

A more complete equation to emphasize in our D&I efforts:

Cultivating Relationships = Seeing the Other

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?”

