

Teambuilding, Networking, Mentoring: Are They Making a Difference for Diversity & Inclusion?

There are several established tools that foster sharing and participation in organizations. Teambuilding, networking and mentoring are the most recognized for cultivating individual and group connections. They are also touted as avenues to promote diversity and inclusion (D&I). But how do we determine the success of the activities, particularly as they pertain to D&I goals? This newsletter explores organizational connection tools to gain a deeper understanding of what constitutes success and when benefits are transferrable to D&I efforts.

A valuable part of teambuilding, networking and mentoring is the ability to develop and shape relationships. This is at the heart of organizational connection tools that bring people together. Beneficial outcomes from connection tools include team cohesion, more resources to tap, and greater ability to pass on knowledge and perspectives. However, unless relationships are built, use of connection tools is inconsistent at best. To foster human development, consideration must be given to relationship dynamics when applying connection tools.

Two elements can help us assess relationship dynamics:

1. The needs that drive the relationship
2. The balance of power within the relationship

It is important to state it is not necessary to have amity or power sharing to develop healthy and respectful relationships. Relationships such as doctor-patient and salesperson-client are often based on needs that have little to do with camaraderie and fellowship. Power imbalances are usually part of relationships such as parent-child and supervisor-subordinate. Undoubtedly, these relationships can be as positive as any. The key is to recognize healthy or unhealthy dynamics that stem from relationship drivers and power imbalances. This awareness provides a bellwether to determine when organizational connection tools are effective or not. D&I initiatives around teambuilding, networking and mentoring should be examined in the same light: not based simply on the availability of the programs, but more on their ability to cultivate productive relationships.

Over the years, I have participated in many teambuilding exercises. Some were beneficial; some were not. Team exercises I found less beneficial often included a competitive aspect. Usually, after team exercises were completed, activities would end with fanfare to celebrate winning teams. There was little, if any, debrief on what made effective or ineffective teams. In the lesser helpful exercises, I observed not all team members were looking to engage everyone's participation to the fullest. It was also apparent that some members were comfortable using power and control to motivate others. In these situations, I did not sense healthy relationships were being developed among the teams.

I have benefitted from many networking events over the years. Many have helped me develop connections that increased my effectiveness in ways I would not have imagined prior to the events. I have also attended networking events and activities where I found participation uneasy for myself. In some of these situations, one or two select groups seemed to dictate the flow of gatherings while others found themselves on the outside looking in. Attempts to join these circles were not always welcoming experiences. In these cases, relationship drivers and power dynamics created an inhospitable space.

I have experienced many good mentor and mentee relationships. Both perspectives have allowed me to grow as a person. I have also witnessed and experienced mentoring relationships that were not fulfilling for others and myself. In a previous newsletter (August 2012), I spoke of a mentor who over the course of a year, asked me on more than one occasion if I had my MBA. Not only had I provided him my resumé and professional goals during one of our early meetings, I had answered his question affirmatively each time he asked. I drifted away from this mentorship to the point that after an absence of a couple years, I barely recognized him when I saw him and he did not recognize me at all. In this situation, the relationship drivers and power dynamics were unhealthy – probably on both our parts. The bottom line is the relationship was not producing anything positive for either of us.

A wide range of needs drive relationships. From the perspective of Maslow's theory, a person's relationship needs can be more closely aligned with safety or self-fulfillment. Where someone's needs fit on the continuum impacts the nature of his or her personal relations. In organizations, individuals concerned about their livelihoods or status may have little interest in relationships they perceive as counter to those needs. When such drivers are paramount, they easily miss or dismiss many on their radars with whom they could build connections. Conversely, there are also many whose needs are driven by learning new perspectives and how these can help enrich an organization or community. These individuals are more likely to seek connections with new and different people who come across their radars.

Power dynamics also drive relationships. Part of our human nature is a desire to control our environments. This tends to reduce chaos and any related stresses. Most of us have experienced sobering situations where our use of power did not accomplish this objective. However, the human tendency is still to seek ways to increase our power and control which can manifest in various ways: seeking to align with more powerful individuals or groups, finding ways to control others, or simply looking for ways to reduce others' control over us. For good or bad, our personal radars are more sensitive to those who help or hinder our power and influence.

Most people can relate to situations where participation in organizational connection activities did not turn out as intended. Relationship benefits are not always mutual and it would be highly naïve to expect every experience to produce positive outcomes for us. The real message to share is that we must seek ways to make connection tools more effective, especially when it comes to D&I. Our ability to focus on the heart of the matter, healthy and respectful relationships, is what

helps us navigate barriers that arise from skewed relationship drivers and power differences. These elements go far in determining whether relationships are mutual or one-sided.

To advance D&I, we cannot afford to lose sight of the big picture: D&I is possible only when we build relationships with others outside our usual circles. Accordingly, it does little good to include others if we have no desire to relate to them. This guides us to another important point. People are more likely to have power and influence within circles they generally operate. When outsiders (i.e., new or different people) are added to the circle, a power disparity often exists versus the insiders. This imbalance can distort how personal connections are developed between the two. In relationships where one has more power than the other, both sides tend to keep their vulnerabilities from being exposed. For the more powerful person, this may manifest in exercising greater control over situations; for the less powerful person, this may manifest in resistance or holding back. With time, many relationships overcome power disparities, but not all.

So what does all this mean for organizational connection tools and D&I goals? What steps can organizations take to ensure connection tools and programs help achieve D&I objectives?

First, organizations should not assume teambuilding, networking or mentoring activities are predisposed toward positive outcomes, especially for people from different or underrepresented backgrounds. Organizations should include ongoing assessments of connection tools and outcomes to determine their effectiveness. Part of these assessments should include monitoring participants and seeking feedback to ascertain the value received, and identifying relationship elements that may be creating barriers to connections. Examples of feedback mechanisms include team exercise debriefs, program appreciation level surveys and mentor ratings. Responses would be used to improve connection tools and programs for current and future participants.

Second, organizations should utilize connection methods and activities that facilitate building personal relationships. Connection objectives that focus solely on development outcomes (e.g., knowledge, influence, leadership) lose sight of the reality that sometimes our comfort levels make it more satisfying to work with some people more than others. While it is unrealistic to expect personal relationships to develop every time, providing bridges to do so is valuable for everyone. The ability to share other aspects of our lives with co-workers is a cohesive asset within organizations.

Third, when people are getting to know one another, organizations should include connection activities that temporarily diminish power dynamics. Management and reporting relationships are important to organizational effectiveness and stability, yet most of these include some level of personal relations to be effective. Power dynamics can be lessened by setting boundaries that make it safe for both sides. Examples of such boundaries include meeting outside the workplace, discussing mainly non-work interests or engaging in fun games. These boundaries allow each

side to open up at a pace that feels comfortable for them. In mentoring situations, such activities can be used initially and periodically to reduce natural relationship barriers and cultivate trust.

Connection tools have historically provided great value to organizations. They have advanced development objectives and helped build harmony in organizations. The use of connection tools can be strengthened with the ability to identify relationship dynamics that impact them. With awareness and feedback, organizations will increase their ability to change course when things are moving in the wrong direction, all adding to the likelihood that D&I efforts will root and grow.

To a better road ahead ...

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?"

