

Diversity is Not the Answer Because Diversity is Not the Problem

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We've all heard or read about or witnessed first hand the demographic changes that are occurring in this country, both in the general population and in the workforce. While changes in the country's racial and ethnic composition are perhaps the most obvious and most frequently discussed, there are equally significant changes occurring in the growth of religious diversity, age, physical and mental abilities, and so on. And, of course, we can't possibly ignore the impact of communications and transportation technologies which are continuing to propel us toward one big integrated world marketplace.

The demographic changes in the U.S. and increasing integration of global economies should make it clear to all of us that today, and for the foreseeable future, diversity is quite simply a fact of life. The pervasive impact of globalization – affecting everything from the ways we work to the foods we eat and clothes we wear – further underscores the fact that diversity is here to stay.

So why then does diversity continue to be a seemingly intractable issue in our workplaces and our communities?

I would suggest to you that, in large measure, it is because diversity is not the answer.

Some of you may wonder how I, an African-American woman who serves as Executive Director of an organization that promotes diversity, could believe such a thing.

The answer is really quite simple.

I believe diversity is not the answer because **diversity is not the problem.**

But, as long as diversity is viewed as a problem to be solved rather than a strength and an asset that can help us advance our goals, diversity will continue to be an intractable issue in our communities and workplaces.



Now, let me be clear here. I realize that leadership in most companies still does not reflect the demographics of their communities or customers. I realize that the achievement gap between white students and students of color is real and that people with disabilities are still relatively invisible in our workplaces. And, I realize that many people see diversity as another manifestation of political correctness, ignoring the very real positive impact that diversity has on business and on society as a whole.

Ellis Cose, a journalist and author, said it this way:

It seems to be that diversity today is a lot like equality or democracy. Everyone's for it. But what the numbers clearly show is that we haven't changed all that much.

What I would suggest to you is that while we must continue to focus on diversity, we must at the same time focus on inclusion. Unless we work to build inclusive environments – organizational cultures where all are truly valued and encouraged to fully contribute their talents – diversity gains will not be sustained.

In the workplace, while strategies to attract diverse talent may succeed for a while in bringing in candidates, the same strategies do not address the impediments that prevent these same sought-after candidates from fully contributing their talents to the organization's goals. Successful recruitment of diverse candidates will not, by itself, produce environments where diversity is fully leveraged to create greater value.

Diversity without inclusion can produce a more representative workforce in terms of numbers, but it is only when diversity is combined with inclusion that we begin to see real transformation where diversity becomes a competitive advantage and bottom line contributor.

Since some people use the term diversity when they are really talking about race, let me come back for a minute to share what I mean by diversity. To me, diversity is really about the different perspectives individuals bring to the table based on the multiple cultural influences that have shaped their view of the world.

To build an inclusive organization does not, in my opinion, require the creation of policies that respond to each individual's unique world view; but rather, we should be striving to create organizational environments that are welcoming and respectful of all stakeholders regardless of their cultural background. It is as much about our attitudes as it is about our stakeholders' expectations.

The ability to effectively engage and work with individuals who are different from us is not an innate skill. It must be learned. To create and sustain an inclusive culture, we have to create programs that enable diverse perspectives to be heard

and acted on. Make no mistake, this is no easy task, but cultural competence can provide the critical link that helps organizations move beyond diversity to inclusiveness.

Inclusive organizations are developed and sustained by conscious efforts of individuals within the organization and the systems, policies and procedures that govern how an organization operates.

As individuals, we can contribute to a culture of inclusion by becoming ALLIES through actions such as:

- Always checking the assumptions you make about others
- Listening with openness to understand
- Leading by example – being consistent, timely, fair and flexible
- Inviting honest feedback and open dialogue
- Engaging in continuous diversity learning and
- Standing up for differences by addressing injustice, inequity, disrespect and exclusion

On the organizational level, an inclusive workplace environment can be created and sustained by:

- Aligning policies, systems and operational practices that respect, value and encourage diverse perspectives;
- Providing opportunities for managers and staff to increase cultural competence, knowledge and skills;
- Identifying, recruiting, and retaining diverse leadership and staff
- Leveraging the skills, knowledge and abilities of all employees to achieve organizational objectives;
- Creating support networks and offering opportunities for mentoring and coaching;
- Maintaining mechanisms for resolving cross-cultural conflicts or misunderstandings; and by
- Recognizing that cultural competence is an ongoing process, not an end result.

Let me come full circle and say again that diversity is not the answer because diversity is not the problem. Only when we begin to actively build cultures of inclusion will we be able to achieve the benefits that come with and from our diversity. ■