



The Evolution of Inclusion

By Wendy Willow Wark

In the beginning

In the beginning there was Affirmative Action. Affirmative Action was all about making amends for past discriminatory practices in the workplace and the academy. Women and people of color, as well as many others who were not white, heterosexual, Christian males, were historically barred from many jobs in the United States both systemically and institutionally. In 1961 President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, which created the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and mandated that projects financed "with federal funds take affirmative action" to ensure that hiring and employment practices are free of racial bias. It was not until 1965 when President Johnson signed Executive Order 11246 however, that there were actual enforceable actions that needed to be taken. This Executive Order also strengthened the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which expanded protection via Title VII of the Act, to prohibit discrimination by covered employers on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The Civil Rights Act also changed the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity into the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, giving it broad legal and administrative powers.

Equal employment opportunity law was the big stick that the government used to assure that employees who were members of "protected classes" (those covered by the Civil Rights Act) were protected once they were hired into positions that were previously not open to them. Affirmative Action includes guidelines for hiring protected class members based on the qualified candidate pool within an employer's geographic zone (a 30 mile radius). The hiring goals are not quotas and never have been. They are recommendations based on the local population.

Mandatory training was implemented for all covered employers in the area of Sexual Harassment Prevention and for any employer where the EEOC determined that there was a "probable cause" to validate an employee's claim of discriminatory treatment. This reactionary approach dominated the field of EEO for many years and resulted in a strong backlash by conservative groups and many white men in the workplace. Reverse discrimination claims began being filed as early as 1978 (Regents of the University of California v. Bakke) and have become fairly regular occurrences. There was also a great deal of negative media regarding affirmative action and EEO cases in an attempt to de-fang the law and its enforcement.

One of the greatest barriers to accepting the benefits of inclusion is a fear of numbers. Many myths and misperceptions surround the reporting of EEO data and Affirmative Action reports to the federal government. Employers conducted panic-stricken scrambles every time



they were audited by the EEOC; they agonized over their Affirmative Action reports and their poor performance in relation to their hiring goals; and they focused on the very numbers that terrified them instead of the people they represented. This sense of impotence created resentment and resulted in an attitude that we will do *only* what we are required to do in many organizations. They felt trapped by the EEOC requirements and not empowered to change them.

The Diversity Revolution

We then experienced the ‘diversity revolution’ a period I like to refer to as the “Kumbaya Stage.” Celebrating difference became the favorite pastime of many members of organizations. People like me were able to proclaim pride in our heritage, our difference as we were never able to do previously. But after the diversity pot luck luncheons and diversity fairs, people would head back to their cubicles and remain exclusive. The celebration of difference did not extend to most employees’ personal lives. The human resources departments did not see any relief from their required reports or a great improvement in their statistics. These disappointments coupled with the negative response from employees who felt that they were not different enough to matter resulted in campaigns set out to prove that ‘our differences make us all the same.’ This approach played down race and gender and focused on less volatile differences such as job title, geographic origin (among U.S. born citizens), marital status, parental status, etc. These non-threatening differences could be used benignly, to prove that an organization embraced diversity, without having to really embrace inclusion.

Diversity practitioners across the U.S. were then asked by their CEOs, “What’s the return on our investment for diversity? This resulted in more panicked scrambling as folks set out to prove that creating a diverse organization improved organizations’ bottom line. The problem with this model is that there was no such proof to be provided.

The More Things Change

The more things changed, the more they remained the same. A major concern of U.S. employers is poor employee engagement. There are millions of people who make it to work each day who are genuinely disengaged. These workers occupy all job titles and levels, including officers. They are in every sector and industry. They are from several different generations. They are from all over the world. They are straight and gay; male and female; of every race and ethnicity; and they cost employers trillions of dollars every day. Employers spend an inordinate amount of money and energy to recruit top talent. They invest huge amounts of resources on the recruitment of women and people of color. Employers have, in general, become successful at recruitment of protected class members, but remain unsuccessful at



retaining them. A phenomenon has developed in the last decade or so that is referred to as ‘the Revolving Door of Turnover.’ This has become a The 64 billion dollar question.

In January, 2007 The Level Playing Field Institute published The Corporate Leavers Survey: The Cost of Employee Turnover Due Solely to Unfairness in the Workplace. The study found that unfairness in the workplace costs U.S. corporations \$64 billion dollars each year - not in law suits - but in turnover of professionals and managers. People of color are three times as likely to be among those who leave as compared to white, heterosexual men and two times as compared to white, heterosexual women. The people surveyed said that they left because of subtle racism, sexism and anti-gay behavior in the workplace: the whispered asides, inappropriate computer screen savers, jokes, exclusion from social activities, lunches and events and etc. These ex-employees did not file complaints with the EEOC or seek litigation; they left quietly and often were hired by their employers’ key competitor.

Marketing Diversity

When the 2000 Census Report was published organizations became aware of a new customer base. People of Color, Gay, Lesbian Transgender and Bisexual people, Women, people born in foreign countries were entering an unprecedented period of prosperity. Smart corporations began marketing diversity. We could turn to any television channel and see flawless models representing organizations that looked beautifully diverse! Benetton led the movement way back in the 1980s with gorgeous young people of all colors wearing their trendy clothing. Their motto “The United Colors of Benetton,” became a generational celebration of diversity. Gradually, other organizations caught on and began targeting women and people of color who now had the buying dollars that they sought. One problem remained; the beautiful ads were not of actual employees. This was particularly glaring when looking at the leaders of organizations. According to a UC Davis Study of California Women Business Leaders (October 2008) women held only 10.9% of the board seats and highest-paid executive officer positions in the top 400 corporations in California. This is up from 10.4% in 2007. The national average for 2007 was 15%. Women represent more than 50% (50.9 in 2000) of the population in the U.S. Nearly half (48.5%), of California’s companies have no women executives.

The Inclusion Evolution

“As individuals we can accomplish only so much. ... Collectively, we face no such constraint. We possess incredible capacity to think differently. These differences can provide the seeds of innovation, progress, and understanding.”

The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies, Scott E. Page

Scott Page's book provides us with scientific proof of the brilliance of multiple perspectives. This is something that I have intuitively known for a long time, but am really grateful for the backing of a mathematician! I do not believe that 'too many cooks spoil the broth' unless they are bad cooks or bad communicators. There is always the possibility that there is an unethical cook in the kitchen who sneaks in extra salt without letting the others know, but if called upon to create the world's best broth everyone wants to be invited! By this, I mean that it would be an honor to be on the 'A List' of cooks for this project. The cooks would all vie to bring their most creative, their most engaged selves to the process. If they were told that their participation was predicated on their cooperation and in fact, interdependence with the other cooks, they would pay attention to that fact and learn how to play well with others or be asked to leave. In other words, every one of us wants to be asked to make a difference, to be told that our presence matters, that our contribution is needed. What an amazing feeling it is to matter. Yet, few employers ever asked their employees to contribute to their innovation. Few employers ask their employees many questions at all for fear of invoking the evil wrath of EEO! This fear of asking questions results in a phenomenon I call "One third of the tree." When I look out of the window and see a beautiful tree, let's say a willow tree and I decide that the willow tree is exactly the addition that I need to make my organization truly diverse, I contact my top recruiter and ask her to go and get that tree. I do research on the care and feeding of willow trees. I tell the other members of the organization that our team will be joined by a willow tree and to be courteous and tolerant and never say offensive things such as "It's not easy being green." Then the recruiter goes out and chops down that tree and hauls it inside. We place it in a huge bucket and every day are diligent about adding nutrients and even throw in a few microorganisms to make the tree feel at home. What we do not realize is that we are missing two-thirds of that tree. We never thought to ask the tree to bring its history and cultural perspective to the organization and so it did not. We did not realize how our organization could benefit by knowing the full being. Another way to look at this is: I bring my gender, generation, class, ethnic and racial perspectives with me when invited to the board room table to contribute. These perspectives cannot be simulated by others who read about people like me. They can *only* be contributed by me. Isn't that amazingly wonderful?

Organisms thrive because their parts are thriving. When an organism has cancer we cut it out or the organism will die. Yet, many organizations exist with dead and dangerous departments, units and individuals for years without taking any action. The whole is only as healthy as its parts. So, just as we need to get to know the whole individual in order to benefit fully by their contributions, we need to think about organizations as organisms that require inclusive care in order to thrive.

Practical Steps



The first step to becoming truly inclusive requires practical steps beginning with the development of a strategic plan that holds *every* member of the organization responsible for creating an inclusive environment. This plan needs to be created with the input of the CEO or equivalent and leadership from all areas across the organization or else it will fail. This plan also needs to support the organization's mission and goals or it will fail. As our world changes at an increasingly rapid pace, this plan needs to be flexible and adaptable or it will fail. These are not very difficult requirements to meet if the planners remember to be inclusive in the process from the very beginning and remember that their interdependence is a key component of its success.

Step two requires a cultural assessment of the organization: Who are you as an organization? Where have you come from? What has been initiated regarding diversity in the past and what has the response been? What education has been provided and how effective has it been. Great tools to employ at this point are confidential surveys and interviews. If people feel really safe they will tell you the truth about their experiences within an organization.

Step three is to develop customized inclusion education for each level of the organization. This education needs to employ adult education theory as no employee enters the training room as a *tabula rasa*. Everyone brings a wealth of experiences, knowledge, ideas and again, perspective to the process. This needs to be given a great deal of attention and respect. The core of the education should focus on the following: "How do *I* benefit by being truly inclusive?"

Step four actually is step one through five - constant communication. Tell them what you are going to do, tell them what you are doing and tell them what you have done. This is the only way to assure support for the process and again, without this it will fail. Communication needs to be customized for employees, clients, board members, stock holders, the public and et al.

Step five is to establish support mechanisms for without them your inclusion strategy will fail. In addition to regular, ongoing education and communication organizations need 'Inclusion Ambassadors' to champion the importance of inclusion. These ambassadors may be members of an organization's diversity councils or affinity groups and should receive special education on inclusion theory, communication, team building, project management and leadership. The 'Inclusion Ambassadors' of an organization might sponsor events, write articles, provide training, develop outreach projects in the community and more. They will become the face of inclusion for your organization and as such should represent many titles, geographies, and functions as well as being culturally diverse. Another great support mechanism is cross-cultural mentoring. Cross-cultural mentoring may be part of a general mentoring program establish by the organization with specific mentoring on cultural topics or interests. For example, I might be a mentor on Puerto Rican culture and have a mentor on time management. Participants should receive training on mentoring and be clear on the expectations of the program.



Results-driven organizations, whether in the public, non-profit or private sectors are seeing their organizational cultures evolve from a past where diversity was ‘tolerated’ to a future where being inclusive increases retention of the best and brightest employees; encourages the development of future leaders and viable succession plans that assure the continuation of an organizations’ success; results in an exponential increase in innovation and market share by involving *every* member of an organization in the creative process and hence an organization that thrives in spite of rapidly changing circumstances. These changes directly impact the bottom line not only through the cost savings of reduced turnover, but by getting and keeping a larger portion of the market and out-innovating one’s competitors.

This process does not have to be difficult. One of the barriers to organizations becoming inclusive is the myth that this is a difficult and arduous process. Nothing can be easier than inviting people to be part of their own promotion and success! It is this simple: the inclusion of all members of an organization in that organization’s success will result in an organization that thrives!

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