

Creating Cultural Transformation through Small Acts of Inclusion

By Dr. William A. Guillory



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Framing the Challenge I begin this paper with a declaration: "It is not possible to create inclusion (or an inclusive culture) without the experience of cultural transformation." Cultural transformation is the process of irreversibly changing the mind-set (culture) of an organization and correspondingly, its policies, processes, and behaviors that results in a more equitable mode of operation. When applied to an individual, I refer to this process as personal transformation.

During the first decade of the 21st century (2000-2010) considerable efforts have been devoted to creating cultural inclusion, particularly by organizations that have been serious about the necessity for diversity. The concept of inclusion came about during the 1990s when it was apparent that the efforts in diversity were not affecting the culture or diversity-related objectives in any irreversible way. During the 1990s, Innovations proposed a holistic approach to cultural transformation, the creation of an inclusive, high-performance organization. We define such an organization as one that leverages the total capacity of all of its people in achieving its organizational and business objectives. The model we suggested for such an organization is shown below as Figure 1.

Figure 1. A Holistic Approach to Inclusion and High Performance

*Inclusion is an "employee-friendly" environment where "equity of opportunity" exists for all employees' success.

The power of this approach is that it accounts for the inseparability of inclusion and performance. The approach taken by most organizations has been a focus on the two dimensions involving Performance (initiatives and competencies) with little or no resistance, and Inclusion Initiatives are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. A Holistic Approach to Inclusion

Such an approach tends to ignore the critical role of employees in the cultural transformation process—who comprise ~80% of most organizations. The necessity for their participation is evidenced by the fact that no organizations I know of to

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date would claim it has achieved inclusion—by measurement. This includes organizations that have been involved in this process for more than 15 years!

Defining Inclusion, Cultural Transformation, and Transformational Leadership
In order to acquire a facility in implementing the process of cultural transformation, we need to define a few critical terms. As a footnote of Figure 1, we defined inclusion as an “employee-friendly” environment where “equity of opportunity” exists for the success of all employees. Employee-friendly refers to the way employees are treated both by managers and each other on a day-to-day basis. This dimension includes values such as respect, sensitivity, integrity, equality, openness, and support which are an overall reflection of the value of people. Equity of opportunity for success refers to the equitable recruitment, development, advancement, and retention of all employees. These are areas that most progressive organizations have focused on in an integrated way with elements of Performance.

The results of the latter efforts above have led to greater mainstream participation by those traditionally excluded, as the culture presently exists—but not cultural transformation! Cultural transformation is the process of permanently invalidating beliefs, attitudes, and values based on ethnocentrism and establishing the values cited in the previous paragraph based on human equality. Simply stated, cultural transformation is the process of creating an inclusive culture. The metaphor that is often used to illustrate transformation is the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. The most important characteristic of this change is irreversibility. Inclusion is the end-state objective. The natural question at this point is “what is the major driving force in achieving inclusion?”—transformational leadership, involving both managers and employees!

Transformational leadership is the ability to:

- create an engaging vision that is embraced by others (Believable)
- inspire others to participate in achieving that vision (Inspirational)
- facilitate proactive change in others (Change Agent)
- treat others in a sensitive, inclusive, and empowered way.(Humility)
- Model the change expected of others (Role Model)

Although all the bulleted items apply to those in official leadership and management roles, which are well-documented, the last three bulleted items

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apply equally to every employee. We have suggested that the most direct and practical way for each employee to participate in the transformation process is through small acts of inclusion®. Small acts are day-to-day behaviors we do with others to support our mutual success and well-being.

Such as having lunch with someone different, examining yourself in terms of inclusive behaviors, sending notes of thanks to someone who supported you, using “we” more than “I,” forgiving someone who was unkind to you, sharing a skill you have learned, teaming more than doing tasks yourself, and simply attempting to be a supportive person to work with. When small acts are done with honesty, integrity, and no expectation in return, they have the power to create transformation. A partial list of small acts are shown as Table 1 here.

Table 1. Small Acts of Inclusion.

Having lunch with someone different than you
Coaching someone culturally different
Mentoring someone outside your comfort zone
Thinking outside the box
Teaming with someone with the opposite brain orientation (Right/Left)
Confronting yourself in terms of exclusion
Honestly evaluating your commitment to inclusion
Noticing diversity in everything you do with others
Sending notes of thanks to the Diversity Team
Sending notes of thanks to managers and leaders who are visible examples of inclusion
Sharing a professional learning experience
Coaching a new skill
Adopting a zero-defect mentality; and coaching it in others
Learning a new skill every week; and passing it on
Clarifying your career plan, then helping others clarify theirs
Evaluating your skills—Interpersonal, Self- Management, Cross-Cultural, Technical, Management, Leadership, etc.
Evaluating others in terms of results—with sensitivity
Helping others with career planning
Helping others adopt a mind-set of 100% responsibility and accountability
Seeking to understand your social network differences
Sharing a personal learning experience
Discouraging gossip
Listening to a personal problem without giving advice.

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Thanking someone for his/her support
Doing something kind for someone with whom you work
Forgiving someone who was unkind to you
Creating a “space” between experience and anger
Being sensitive to the shortcomings of others—no one is “truly” perfect
Learning from the shortcomings of others—they may be a mirror
Making every interaction “a moment of truth”
Counting the number of friends you made by being “right”

Social Networking and the Viral Dissemination of Cultural Transformation through Small Acts of Inclusion©

When small acts are combined with social networking, they have the power to create viral transformation of a culture. We define social networking as the process of using everyday interpersonal and virtual interactions between employees to create a transformation in the quality of employee relationships. A social network is a group of individuals with common responsibilities and/or overlapping interests, such as project teams, leadership teams, sales and marketing groups, business units, business partner (affinity) groups, etc.

These are naturally-existing groups that interact with each other on a regular or daily basis. These daily interactions are as few as 5 times a day (or 25 times a week) to 10 times a day (or 50 times a week). Suppose we paid attention to those naturally-existing interactions such that we focus on the quality and intentionally of them. The result would be an incremental transformation in the “friendliness” of the culture—where inclusion is the natural result. When a critical number of employees participate, the process becomes viral.

Why the word “friendly?” It sounds so “soft.” “Our manager may laugh at the whole thing.” “Isn’t it just being nice to others?” The truth is organizations that have implemented this process, both formally and informally, find that all of these things happen. They have also found that “soft” does not mean easy, particularly when practicing small acts with someone with whom you have a difficult relationship. It becomes transforming because we have to fundamentally change something about personality. So the easier way to deal with the fear of change is to discount the process or initiative.

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Results received by organizations that have implemented small acts have found the initiative to be overwhelmingly positive, connecting, and a morale builder. Fifty percent (50%) or more of the small acts created by organizations have been in the category of “social interactions.” This percentage includes lists exceeding 1000 suggestions. This is the reason we have expanded our definition of inclusion to add “employee friendly.” This dimension is more important to employees than we previously estimated. When we consider the multiplier factor of small acts by the use of social network theory, we can show that a single individual’s actions with six other colleagues, ultimately influences the behaviors of 216 other individuals. When this factor is multiplied by the participation of others, we begin to really understand the power of this phenomenon for organizational transformation.

Advantages of Small Acts of Inclusion®

1. Cost Effective—this initiative primarily involves the active participation of the organization after an initial investment in learning the program.
2. Rapid Implementation—the implementation process can be implemented with the least amount of orientation. The “how to” is simple.
3. Rapid Cultural Change—the change process toward inclusion occurs rapidly through social networking using small acts of inclusion.
4. Rapid Network Unit Transformation—the rate of change within a network unit does not depend on the rate of change of the organization.
5. Selective Selection—network units and individuals can influence change without the participation of everyone.
6. Ease of Implementation—the acts of inclusion are small, everyday things we do with co-workers.
7. Alignment and Unity—the process creates a focus on cooperation, collaboration, and information and knowledge sharing.

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8. Cultural Transformation—the process creates the most vital element for inclusion—individual and work force transformation.
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