

Cultural Transformation—The Key to 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.

These statements are captured by the State of Mind Diagram® we first proposed in 1985:

Terms like bias or prejudice, whether conscious or unconscious, are mentally programmed ways of thinking that selectively produce the results we observe at the expense of equitable alternatives. In other words, the long term results we observe are more dependent on the organization's mind-set than short term functional change. This is the fundamental reason inclusion is so difficult to achieve. When our efforts are focused almost solely on first-order change (functional processes and behaviors), second-order change (transformation) may or may not occur—and it often does not occur.

For example, one of the most easily measured objectives of inclusion is the achievement of "diversity at all levels"—a uniquely defined distribution of leadership and management personnel that is reflective of a combination of an organization's existing population base and/or the available workforce resources. The focus becomes aggressive diverse recruitment, equitable succession planning, and targeted mentoring, fast-track programs—all processes of first-order change. Even when these efforts are successful, the advanced individuals begin to examine the existing culture and their prospects for further advancement and begin to consider other alternatives. Often, this examination leads to the conclusion that there has been little or no change in the culture (second-order change), but a prescribed set of processes and behaviors that give the illusion of inclusion. The illusion or the reality of progress toward inclusion is best illustrated when there is a change in leadership or leadership has to commit to actions requiring cultural transformation—I define leadership as the President, CEO, and those who influence most the operation of the organization. The answer to the illusion or the reality is reflected by the following question: "Are the initiatives sustained or compromised?"

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For the most part, we are attempting to irreversibly change (transform) the mind-set (culture) of the organization—which has been existent since the organization’s inception—through efforts focused almost totally on first-order change. This is the fundamental reason no organization (that I am aware of) can claim the achievement of inclusion; at least by a comprehensive cultural measurement. (This conclusion reminds me of the French expression, “The more things change, the more things stay the same.”)

Inclusion

At Innovations, we define inclusion as an employee-supportive workplace where equitable opportunity exists for all employees to experience mainstream participation and personal success. This definition is dynamic—meaning it continues to change as we learn, through experience, the intricate process of achieving these two objectives. For example, employee-supportive refers to a workforce that is employee-friendly, employee-sensitive, and employee-engaged; where the everyday behaviors among all employees dominantly reflect support, sensitivity, and respect for the individual that result in committed employee performance. We discovered the importance of this dimension of inclusion through employee feedback from our work with the financial division of a leading automobile manufacturer by their implementation of Small Acts of Inclusion®.

Cultural Transformation

The most obvious question is “how do we implement the process of cultural transformation?” The most direct answer is, “When implementing any change processes and inclusive behaviors, the vital focus should be on an irreversible change in mind-set and thinking.” For example, if there is a declaration of what the Executive Leadership composition should (or will) be in three years, it should be established as a “permanent institutionalized way of functioning,” regardless of who is the succeeding President or CEO.

As stated above, cultural transformation is the collective personal transformation of a critical number of individuals (leadership, management, and the workforce) who dominantly influence the organizational functioning. Personal transformation occurs in three major ways:

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A Cognitive Approach: Workshop (or classroom) exercises that directly challenge an individual's present way of thinking (Direct Cognitive Transformation).

An Experiential Approach: Workplace processes (interactions) that require alternative, out-of-comfort-zone responses (experiences) outside of an individual's normal (not natural) behavioral pattern—either proactively or unconsciously (Indirect Experiential Transformation).

Traumatic Events: Life-changing events that permanently re-orders an individual's reality (life), e.g., separation, divorce, death, illness, job loss, money loss, etc. These events may also happen to organizations when there is a dramatic (or traumatic) change in people, performance, or profitability (Indirect Traumatic Transformation). The first of these three, cognitive transformation, involves “cognitive engagement.” Most diversity practitioners use this process—with widely varying processes and results. Successful engagement requires a highly skilled facilitator. By highly skilled I mean one who has gone through his or her own “rite of passage” and successfully recognized and resolved his or her own prejudices, biases, and modes of judgmental behaviors. Successful engagement means that 80% of the participants in a seminar have had a similar, transformative experience. The workshop (classroom) participants are now ready for more integrative policies, procedures, and behaviors, consistent with inclusion. These functional skills serve to reinforce the personal transformation experienced by a participant in the workshop (or seminar). It should be noted, in general, that cognitive engagement is particularly suited to scientists, engineers, accountants, lawyers, and other highly left-brain individuals or professionals.

The second of the three, experiential transformation, also occurs in a workshop or classroom setting when participants are primarily engaged with each other. Successful processes of irreversible change involve dialogue for resolution of a difficult situation, facilitation with and among each other during the dialogue, and ultimately problem resolution that requires a change in thinking and behaviors. These can be achieved with a challenging case study exercise. The key element is the participation of teams with widely divergent team members required to reach consensus agreement with respect to concepts such as 100% responsibility, zero-defect performance, and inclusive support of personnel. Experiential transformation is most vital when participants return to the workplace environment. This is where the rubber hits the road. The overriding objective is to not only achieve measurable “diversity results,” e.g., promotions, mainstream participation, diverse workplace recruitment, prescribed behavioral changes, but to simultaneously focus on whether there has been a fundamental change in the

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quality of employee relationships across differences. The culture, in terms of inclusion, must be defined and progressively measured! Human interaction, framed by an overriding business or performance objective, is the most effective means of achieving cultural transformation within the workplace. I sometimes refer to this process as the workshop of life.

The third and most challenging way personal transformation occurs is the experience of a traumatic event. So those who usually ask “what exactly is transformation?” I usually respond by asking him or her to remember a traumatic (or sometimes dramatic) event in their lives such as those listed above. This form of transformation may also be triggered by events such as hurricanes (Katrina, 2005), tsunamis (Japan, 2011), or economic recessions (U.S., 2009). I usually reserve the word “change” for functional processes or behaviors. Such processes or behavioral changes are often reversible—unless there is conscious intention.

The bottom line: Unless cultural transformation is an inherent part of the cultural change process, then inclusion (or an inclusive culture) will not occur as a progressive process. It will eventually occur as an inevitable, evolutionary process—probably driven by changing demographics and attitudinal changes.

Measuring Inclusion

Assuming we have a relatively convincing business case for inclusion, we can seriously proceed to measure where we are, what our rate of progress is, and what our “dynamic” end-state looks like. We propose a measurement instrument based upon the inseparability of inclusion and performance—both of which are embedded in the culture as shown below:

Our survey measurements over a 20-year period have shown that when we focus dominantly on Performance and less on Inclusion, most organization’s overall performance tend to “peak-out” in the 70 to 75% range. When we realize that people—with human, cultural, and functional differences—are implementing the Performance initiatives shown below, we immediately realize why we experience this upper limit. Their differences, which are addressed to varying extents, begin to inhibit increased performance.

The realization that inclusion must be seriously addressed, if overall performance is to measurably increase, is the breakthrough to higher performance. A typical representation of this component is shown below:

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A crucial element of this approach suggests that everyone, not just leadership and management, has a role to play in the process of cultural transformation to achieve inclusion. We have shown that this process can be effectively achieved through Small Acts of Inclusion®.

We are now in a position to ask, “What is our individual and organizational performance potential?” It is certainly much greater than 70 to 75%! This question is the next step in performance survey measurements.

The Present Future of Diversity and Inclusion

It is fairly obvious what the present and future stages of diversity and inclusion are. The present stage is the integration of diversity and inclusion with organizational performance. This stage can be clearly measured by a performance-oriented cultural survey with extensive demographic breakdowns, well beyond race/ethnicity and sex/gender—although it should be understood that inclusion will never be achieved until these dimensions are resolved. At present, they are making a “re-appearance” as unconscious bias, instead of the word diversity. However, the two are synonymous.

The future stage involves the “total integration” of inclusion into every aspect of the organization’s operations—Leadership, Talent Management, Employee Engagement, Performance, Management, Succession Planning, Safety, Quality, Customer Service, etc. However, Inclusion, as an initiative on its own, must be first achieved, as described in this paper.

An outstanding example of an organization that has taken this groundbreaking approach is the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Upon taking office as Secretary, Thomas Vilsack declared a “call to action” for the cultural transformation of USDA at a Leadership Forum, September, 2009. (He did not state cultural change). This initiative was led by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration. The individual who spearheads this movement is Dr. Alma Hobbs.

The full array of activities of this initiative is nothing short of phenomenal in terms of the transformation of their workplace environment—from the establishment of the Transformation Task Force (comprised of SESs) to the design of a

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comprehensive business case publication, extensive field involvement, implementation of Small Acts, establishment of the Office of Cultural Transformation, and most of all, a very positive follow-up Pulse Survey, to the present. Details of their initiative can be obtained from The USDA Office of Cultural Transformation.

Summary

There are many organizations that have conducted dedicated diversity and inclusion initiatives over many years—with varying degrees of permanent progress. Many who have made extraordinary progress I am directly familiar with those indirectly, primarily through literature, conference presentations, and conversations with colleagues and practitioners. The major objective of this article is to emphasize the necessity for cultural transformation as the crucial element in achieving the “dynamic end-state” of inclusion. In addition, this achievement must be confirmed by a comprehensive cultural measurement instrument (with comprehensive demographic breakdowns as described in this paper) that permeates the entire business operation—from people to productivity to profitability.

I look forward to comments and feedback from practitioners (in the broadest sense) of diversity, inclusion, and high performance of progress and successes of which I am not aware or having a differing point-of-view.