

From Exclusion to Inclusion

By Steve Hanamura



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Choir was such a positive experience for me at my high school in California that I was determined to find a college where I could continue singing and use that forum to meet new people. I heard about a small college in McMinnville, OR with a student body of 1,000 and a 40 voice choir that toured – just what I was looking for!

My admission request to the college was accepted so now I just had to nail the choir audition. Three of us tried out for the two bass openings. I was not selected. That was disappointing in itself but then I found out that the director's reasons for not choosing me had nothing to do with my singing abilities. I am blind and he was concerned that I would be an inconvenience on tours to the other choir members and to the people that housed us. Now I was devastated. I already struggled with low self – confidence and here I was in Oregon, hundreds of miles from home and I had lost what I saw as my one chance to “fit in.” I felt isolated and excluded.

One year later, I worked up the nerve to audition again. I went in to see the director and he told me there was no need to audition; I was in. He said over half of the choir members had already advocated on my behalf after hearing me sing with a small ensemble from my fraternity and knew I had a deep bass voice. Not only that, they were willing to help me on tour and did not consider it an inconvenience. I felt elated and included!

In the following years I was a member of two other choirs where I felt included. Although just because someone with a gift for singing is part of a choir does not necessarily mean they would feel included. Why is inclusion so important and what makes one experience inclusive and another experience exclusive? In my experience with the aforementioned groups there were several factors that lead to inclusion.

First, each member of the choir brought a unique talent to the group. All were able to at least carry a tune and at best had soloist quality. On their own, a soloist can create beautiful music, but that beauty can be enhanced even further by the blended harmony of the other members of the choir. By combining their voices the choir members were able to give audiences a much richer appreciation of the talents and gifts of the group rather than focusing on the soloist. Inclusion, in this case, happened because even though not everyone was a soloist, each person had a level of competence which allowed them to perform as a part of the group. Singing as one group with different abilities brought out a full sound.

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Another factor to consider in a choir is the key role the director plays. This individual must have the capability to listen to each singer to determine just how their voice would fit in to the success of a choir.

An inclusive workplace should function like a choir - collaborative relationships between accounting, engineering, HR, administrative support, field workers, global offices, upper management and so on working in harmony toward a shared goal. The determining factor of whether or not a group will be inclusive is dependent on four attributes:

1. Each person is competent in what they do.
2. Expectations are made clear by the conductor or leader
3. Everyone is clear about the intended goal
4. There is an appreciation of an expanding global market place

If inclusion is about harmony and team work, then exclusion is “looking out for Number One (me),” unfortunately a predominate theme in the American culture. In the battle to be recognized for the individual gift, the group is excluded which is counterproductive to the mantra in many organizations of “let’s be team” or “let’s create a climate of inclusion.”

Another factor which contributes to the exclusion conversation is our biases that we may have about people. Bias trumps our ability to see competence which was the first tenant we mentioned when talking about creating inclusion. Biases we have about workers come in many forms - work groups, country of origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religious convictions ... You get the idea. In this day and age of becoming more culturally competent, we may have forgotten the art of asking some key questions. “Tell me how you best receive information.” “How does your cultural background influence the way you and I need to communicate with each other?”

Just as a choir director is able to hear the individual voice and then blend the many different voices into one beautiful sound, so too the manager, the leader, the CEO of the organization must look beyond the biases and see the giftedness of each employee. By blending the variety of gifts an inclusive environment is created and goals can be met.

I recognize that inclusion is not as easy as recognizing and blending so let me share how some of my colleagues define it.

Judith Katz and Frederick Miller, of The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group define inclusion as a sense of belonging, feeling respected, valued and seen for who we

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are as individuals; there is a level of supportive energy and commitment from leaders, colleagues, and others so that we individually and collectively can do our best work.

Bernardo Ferdman, PhD. professor at Marshall Goldsmith School of Management defines inclusion on two basic levels: individual and collective. Both are important for creating conditions in which everyone has the opportunity to be authentic and appreciated, and to feel safe, engaged valued and excited in the workplace. Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr. says that inclusion is about effectively managing the complexities of our similarities and differences.

Finally, the definition for inclusion that we work from at Hanamura Consulting is the need to belong to, to be a part of, to not be discounted.

In today's workforce diversity and inclusion are being used interchangeably. Some practitioners think of diversity as the verb and inclusion as the noun, while others think of inclusion as the verb and diversity as the noun. No matter how we choose to define inclusion, I think it is important to remember that to the individual, inclusion is a very personal matter. What we really want is the right to demonstrate one's competencies on the job.

There are personal and institutional barriers that need to be dealt with if we are going to succeed in creating an inclusive workforce. Those in education and research need to understand there is still a gap between theory and behavioral practices. We need to close the gap between the different sectors so that inclusion can be addressed as a universal construct. Inclusion might well be thought of as a core value all of us can strive for in our interactions with others. To paraphrase the words of Dr. Thomas diversity and inclusion is a journey, not a destination.