

Mitigating the Impact of Bias with Respect to Participation and Performance

By Dr. William A. Guillory



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Some years ago, I wrote a paper that suggested that population demographics coupled with changing attitudes would ultimately force the business world to deal with the subject of diversity—with its myriad of definitions. That situation has apparently come to pass, both in terms of the emerging U.S. and global workforce, but also in terms of global business expansion; particularly, into China and India.

As a continually evolving phenomenon, I define diversity as the capacity to compatibly reconcile differences. I define its companion, Inclusion as a consciousness of equality that is reflected by cooperation, collaboration, and unlimited human expression.

Inclusion, as I have defined it, is a necessity to make diversity a reality. The two are inextricably coupled. A consciousness of equality is a dominant mind-set which can exist within the culture of a family, community, business, country, society, and/or ultimately a planet of people.

Diversity, as a phenomenon, appears to have opened Pandora's Box with respect to exposing the way we have used differences, historically, for minimizing the cultures of others; their values, mores, and folkways; and ultimately, the nature of their being as a human species—whether it is religion, politics, economics, business, or simply the way others socialize. The most systemic way we have imposed this phenomenon on each other is through colonialization and occupation. Extolling the differences of some as superior to those of others—physical, cultural, religious, or social—is the underlying source of ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotype, and “implicit or unconscious bias”—the last presumably unknown by the practitioner.

Presented in this way, we can begin to “see” that diversity, inclusion, and unlimited human expression are impossible to achieve without transforming from a consciousness of polarization to one of compatibility—both within ourselves and in concert with others. This transformation is the essence of what diversity and inclusion are attempting to achieve—mostly unconsciously, but certainly intuitively.

The essence of this Introduction is to recognize, acknowledge, and consciously decide how we plan to constructively participate and perform, in spite of the

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Expert Forum

present historically-sourced context—and the requirements which are necessary to do so.

It All Begins With Me!

It is vital to begin exploring in a different direction and with a different focus, if there is to be personal (or inner) reconciliation. In other words, the journey of reconciliation begins with creating compatibility within oneself. More specifically, with not attempting to gain the respect of others before acquiring that condition within one's self.

This process involves the inward examination of beliefs, biases, and attitudes we have about ourselves—specifically those of inferiority or superiority, irrespective of “how and when” they were programmed. For example, if I become upset by implicit or explicit statements or behaviors of others about my mental capacity, then the process begins with identifying and eliminating the source of my upset from an internal perspective, rather than automatically striking out externally. Reconciliation means that the ultimate realization is that my upset is due to my own self-programming. This is a very difficult, and yet a breakthrough realization. (I began this section by stating that we were going to take a different approach rather than point out the well-known barriers which have existed from time immemorial; with no permanent solution in sight, only more “stimulating conversation!”)

The “nugget of wisdom” that follows is that others do not have the power (or the wisdom) to bestow upon me respect. I become respected by others the instant I respect myself, and behave accordingly. Not because of deeds of accomplishment, but because of my observable “way of being.” The same journey is necessary for an individual having a programmed belief about his or her inherent superiority accomplishments or self-confirming examinations. In essence, the first step to mitigating bias with respect to participation and performance is the inner journey of reconciliation; resulting in self-respect.

Discovering Your Natural Propensity

I believe that each of us is endowed with a propensity to naturally express something in the world—whether in the area of science, art, politics, business, military, people, etc. Discovering what that propensity is and expressing it in the world is the second step of our journey. I am sure by now, that we each recognize that this is also an internal exploration.

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Expert Forum

The propensity that I speak of is a passion that burns within each of us, sometimes as an ember, dying for expression and sometimes as a raging inferno. In organizations, it is the genesis of the concept of Engagement. For someone to be engaged, it is necessary for her or him to know the activity for which she or he is passionate. One's natural propensity begins with passion. Discovery of it is reflected in those activities in life where we experience the greatest, joy, happiness, and feeling of contribution to others. And then identify the common theme in each of those experiences.

I started my career as a professor of chemistry at several research universities. What I ultimately discovered was that the practice of science was a medium for assisting the learning, growth, and knowledge acquisition of others in their preparation for navigating life. This passion eventually led to establishing a consulting firm based upon personal and organizational transformation. I also discovered that the common theme was "People and their health, happiness, and well-being," without the necessity to dictate the form it should take for each of those individuals I coached.

When we discover and live our inner passion, the boundary between work and play disappears. Simultaneously, the boundaries between differences also disappear, since the context of separation, polarization, and competition with respect to others will also melt away. Competition transforms from an external perspective to competing with one's personal challenges to fully expressing his or her capability. In this realm of competition, there are no winners and losers—even if a score is retained for posterity! In sports, it is referred to as, "leaving everything on the field or the court."

In essence, the second step of our journey to mitigating the impact of bias is discovering our natural propensity for its expression in the world —the necessity for inferiority and superiority do not exist within this context. It is just you and your naturally driven inner expression.

Being 100% Responsible and 100% Accountable

This step is probably, by far, the most difficult of our journey before going out into the world of participation—regardless of age. I describe this step as the foundation for constructively participating in life. I also suggest that we take the assertion in the title of this section as a given, without the necessity for proof; a leap of faith in ourselves, for which desirable results will continue to occur in our life's journey.

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Expert Forum

It may be necessary to approach this “state of being” gradually, depending upon where we are at present—50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, or percentages in between these. The point to realize is that there are consequences for which we don’t get to vote on, whenever we deny responsibility and accountability for events in our lives—both consciously and unconsciously.

The first consequence is that the extent to which we deny responsibility is in direct proportion to action outside ourselves that is necessary for resolution. For example, if I do not accept responsibility for my performance where unfairness is a factor, then the unfairness must be externally corrected in order for me to achieve performance expectations. I am powerless to aid myself in some constructive manner. Whether or not this situation is good or bad, or right or wrong, that is the reality of the consequence. However, by choosing responsibility, irrespective of the unfairness, puts me in a proactive role for action in my behalf. This is simply a transformation in mind-set to a higher percentage of responsibility.

The second consequence that naturally follows is the feeling of victimization and a greater sense of powerlessness. For example, the situation I described in the Introduction may seem unfair from an historical perspective, but the question is “Is there some constructive way for me to respond or choice I can make that will bring about compatible resolution within myself, in the present?” Tough question, but it takes me out of the state of victimization into empowerment, whether we are discussing exclusion from opportunities of recruitment, visible projects, development, or advancement. There is always a “What If?” which is not available as long as we feel victimized.

In essence, the third step of our journey to mitigating the impact of bias is going beyond victimization and focusing on the other side of the Chinese symbol for Danger; and that is Opportunity—by asking the “out of context” question: “What can I proactively do in my behalf, given the fact that unfairness may or may not change in the short term?” There is always an empowering answer, if we ask the question.

Transcending (Personal) Limitations

I suspect, when we consider limitations, we usually think of limitations we are subjected to rather than those we impose upon ourselves. The latter are much more imprisoning than those which are external—particularly, in democratic organizations and societies. We are primarily limited by our own programming or programming we have accepted, both consciously and unconsciously as communicated by our culture. For example, I grew up in the south when

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Expert Forum

everything was segregated, with an implicit and explicit stigma of inferior and superior. Even though, “things have changed, those underlying stigmas still exist, in different form.” We typically call this progress. Nevertheless, it is vital to understand that adopting a sigma involves personal choice-making. Since we originally programmed them, we are also responsible for invalidating them. With respect to diversity and inclusion (and life), the major self-imposed limitations we appear to have adopted are:

An unwillingness for inner exploration

An unwillingness to adopt a mind-set of empowerment

An unwillingness to do what is ethically and morally right

An unwillingness to practice Inclusive Leadership

An unwillingness to practice inclusive relationships across differences

Transcending these limitations is the real key to achieving diversity and inclusion.

For example, the serious exploration of one’s subconscious would probably lead to the realization that subliminal biases are held by us all in a kind of “unconscious conspiracy,” since we dominantly avoid most kinds of in-depth explorations. Especially, explorations that provide the breakthrough to creating inclusion. Through in-depth exploration, we might discover that we really believe the present, evolutionary status quo is preferable to progressive inclusion. Since such a realization would reveal the conspiracy for which we could no longer deny. We would simply be left with the truth. The realization of which would be transformational!

Transcending a mind-set of limited empowerment probably involves the acceptance of playing on an uneven playing field—not as a victim, but as a non-reactive realization of “what is.” However, at some level of consciousness, there is a tendency to believe this should not be necessary. Fairness should prevail, even though that is not the reality. Therefore, there might be reluctance, resistance, or even an unwillingness to explore (constructive) unreasonable and unfair—but effective—performance measures for success. In a more empowered sense, the real question is “How do I succeed with the hand I’ve been dealt? At least in the short term?” Meanwhile, the progressive process of achieving inclusion is still occurring. In fact, it might even be accelerated if both approaches were implemented.

Transcending the limitation of doing what is ethically and morally right is standard practice in most business organizations. Not only as part of their legal business dealings, which are typically uncompromised, but most have Ethic Officers who ensure the organization does business at the highest level of integrity. Yet, when this principle is applied to diversity and inclusion, it is questioned, usually by

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Expert Forum

asking, “What do diversity and inclusion have to do with business success?” It’s like an organizational principle which states: “Can you provide me with a convincing business case as to why we should provide selected groups equitable opportunity for success?” In fact, the Ethics Officer should be the leading champion, right along with the President/CEO, in establishing a specific time frame for the achievement of diversity and inclusion; from a moral perspective, the same as we do with ethical business practices.

Transcending the limitation of practicing Inclusive Leadership requires individuals in leadership roles to become skilled in holistic leadership. This means mastering the spectrum of competencies shown below:

Demonstrates Self-Mastery
Develops People
Manages Inclusion
& Performance
Delivers Business
Results

Most individuals in leadership roles are either unwilling and/or not held accountable for mastering the first two competencies; particularly, Self-Mastery. Again, it involves the exploration of one’s subconscious, where unconscious biases reside, thrive, and play out in presumably, unconscious ways. Until those in leadership roles are required to transcend their fears of becoming “Astronauts of Inner Space,” Diversity, Inclusion, and Inclusive Leadership will continue to progress at a snail’s pace. (Keep in mind, this phenomenon has been around since 1985 with the publication of WORKFORCE 2000!)

Transcending a mind-set of resisting inclusive relationships is probably sourced from the underlying fear of discovering that an array of personal beliefs has no validity in establishing superiority over others. In other words, when one is courageous enough to establish authentic relationships of “accepting differences in each other,” “creating mutual trust,” and “mutually supporting each other’s success and well-being,” then using differences for advantage is revealed as an illusion!

I would suggest that is the underlying reason we retain separateness and polarization. Since we might discover that the differences we oppose and espouse, simultaneously, are simply a mutually agreed-to game of denying our inherent connectedness. Albeit, a deadly game in some cases. The realization of which would shatter the reality of our belief of righteousness in our survival-created value system.

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Expert Forum

In the final analysis, it is unnecessary to understand, argue, or disprove my assertions, the invitation to create compatible human relationships, as the context for human existence, is something we tend to avoid, at all cost! This assertion is based upon simple “observation,” not speculation. The following section is for those who are willing to explore this challenge.

In essence, the fourth step in our journey to mitigating the impact of bias is a willingness to discover and transcend self-imposed limitations to the experience of differences by setting aside our strongly-held beliefs about those that keep us imprisoned!

Human Interaction Across Differences

We now begin the exploration of “authentic human encounter” as the most profound way to experience personal transformation. The “authentic” descriptor is a characteristic we gradually learn as we learn how to become human beings, through everyday interactions.

“Authentic human interaction is the most powerful phenomenon for invalidating belief structures which have no basis in experiential reality.”

The major barrier to engaging this way of thinking is challenging the validity of the deeply entrenched dyad associated with inferiority/superiority. More specifically, the discovery that such a dyad, in reality, is an illusion. What’s even more illuminating is the realization that we all play both sides, depending on the situation. For example, as a person of color, I could claim that being treated in an inferior, but subtle, manner is an everyday occurrence—both in the workplace and in life.

On the other hand, I tend to be unaware of how I treat my boyhood friends, in an inferior way, who didn’t finish college. This realization has the potential to invalidate both components of the dyad. It is replaced with a “natural way of being,” not a new belief structure, such as “everyone is equal.” The latter replacement simply creates, simultaneously, its opposite! More disempowering programming!

In the absence of both, as a realization, we have a blank canvas for creating a new reality of equality and compatibility.

BTW: I define equality as the experience of humility. It is extremely humbling to the ego to experience itself as not superior or inferior to anyone, but simply

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Expert Forum

equal; with a myriad of differences. That's a tough one for the ego to swallow.

I often pose the question to friends: "Would you be willing to live your life with respect to others within a context of equality and compatibility; without any formal announcement and no expected acknowledgment?" The focus is to "Be a difference" in the way you live rather than "Making a difference"—usually with some ulterior motive, commonly conversion or some form of acknowledgement. I wonder what would happen if a majority of us decided to live our lives in this way. First, with those we live and work with. Then, with those we associate with. Then, with anyone we encounter. I wonder if such a phenomenon could go viral.

Instead of changing the world, we could all focus on changing the way interact with each other that brings about small, cumulative interactions of mutual transformation—as we systematically invalidate belief structures which maintain separation, polarization, and human conflict. Pretty soon, the world would change!

Holding Ourselves Accountable for Empowering Each Other

The question which naturally arises once viral dissemination of a context of "equality and compatibility" takes over is, "How do we make an accounting of our progress or the achievement of an intermediate goal?" Such as the distribution of wealth and poverty—as an inseparable context. Are there certain conditions we will want to espouse as fundamental to human existence?

This is a very difficult point in our existence when we begin to define "how we should live." "Who establishes the rules?" At this point in human evolution, I would guess that a context of "equality and compatibility," as realities of being, might include the following questions for establishing a context for human existence:

Does every human being have an inherent right to be fed, clothed and sheltered, whether he or she chooses to work or not?

Does the welfare of the group supersede the personal interests of the individual?
Innovations International, Inc. www.innovint.com Page 9

Do humans have inherent dominion over other (not lower) forms of animals and the environment?

Does every human being have an inherent right to be educated, as a condition for survival?

With an expanded level of consciousness and wisdom, are human beings capable of ensuring their continued existence?

Etc.

Summary

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Expert Forum

The crux of the matter is that diversity, inclusion, and human compatibility will never come about as an institutional phenomenon—both in organizations as well as society—until we acknowledge and begin to intentionally deal with the underlying, historically sourced belief structures founded on superiority and inferiority. We are really talking about transforming a state of consciousness, while devoting most of our time, energy, and effort on changing processes, procedures, and behaviors without asking the most critical question: “Are these efforts intended to directly invalidate the consciousness of separateness, polarization, and the dyad of superior/inferior to create a consciousness of equality and compatibility?” If such efforts are not creating this transformation, then the intention is not there! And the result is the continuation of the status quo, in a different-looking, masqueraded form that we describe a progress.

In the meantime, each individual has a choice. The choice is the major theme of this conversation. The stepwise process of mitigating the impact of bias with respect to participation and performance are:

Acknowledging and non-resistantly accepting what is as a prelude for proactive, constructive participation and performance.

Discovering one’s inner passion for life and living it.

Personally reconciling, from within, one’s own belief structures relating full personhood; resulting in self-respect.

Being 100% responsible and 100% accountable for the events which occur in one’s life.