

The Changing Face of Diversity

By Steve Hanamura



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It seems that in the fast and faster pace of today's world we may be accomplishing more, but at what cost. We can get "there" in less time thanks to faster planes, trains, autos and GPS. We can get in touch faster because of e-mail, Instant Messaging and 4G phones. With the internet we have access to more information than we know what to do with. Yet how much have we really accomplished in human relationships, with diversity and inclusion?

I would like to invite you to stop momentarily to reflect on the significance of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. In order to guide our thinking perhaps we can look at this in three different ways - where have we been, where are we now, and where do we need to go in the future.

Where have we been? D & I helps us examine how we treat others. Historically we can name more than a few evidences of unjust treatment -the holocaust, internment of Japanese Americans, discrimination against women and people of color. To this end the Civil Rights Act became a very important piece of legislation that signaled that we weren't going to tolerate this kind of behavior anymore. Some fifty years later we are still striving to eradicate some of these problems, but we must also be mindful of progress that has been made. As some practitioners begin to pass the baton onto newer and younger D & I professionals, it is important to remember some of the deep heritage from which this movement began.

Where are we now? At its inception diversity was driven by compliance, but today we have seen this field emerge into a full blown industry. In the mid 1980s when my career began external consultants were viewed as experts in the field. Today however, we see the advent of chief diversity officers, and employee resource groups well entrenched in many of our corporations, government agencies and colleges and universities. Some college campuses even have coordinators of disabilities services to help students with disabilities become successful. I challenge anyone who thinks diversity doesn't affect the bottom line to look at statistics of the number of organizations that presently have a D & I component to their business.

Where do we need to go in the future? A former national football league coach named George Allen once said, "The future is now." I like that statement and while long term strategic planning is important, because we are so fast paced it is more difficult to engage in that kind of thinking. At best we may be able to forecast out for two to three years. In diversity speak we must be mindful that our actions are no longer nationwide in scope, but worldwide. In our seminars we talk about the

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three reasons why organizations got into diversity as part of their workplace initiatives: compliance, business case and ethics. I would assert now that we are in the twenty-first century there are more complexities to this dialog. I like putting diversity and inclusion into six different buckets: the aforementioned compliance, ethics and business case and add to that social justice, politics and morality. Let me explain what I mean about morality. With more recent emphasis on religion in the workplace I was in conversation and correspondence with a well known Christian organization. My goal was to help them see the value of diversity instead of it being something they merely thought needed to be tolerated. Their response to me was this is not a diversity or a political issue, but rather it is a moral issue. Their response taught me that if I am going to impact this group I must first acknowledge them for who they are and where they are.

As far as immediate next steps for us to consider I introduce the following:

1. Be prepared to engage in a dialog that will help us be of like mind regarding D & I. This doesn't mean we can't approach the work differently but we must find some common denominators of what core competencies should look like.
2. We must approach our field with a deep understanding of intercultural differences as assets. Right now I don't see diversity practitioners in corporate life meeting with educators at a substantive level. While it is true there are a few people doing this, as a general rule there is very little dialog between these two different sectors.
3. We must leave a legacy for the younger generations that are following us. I don't think all of us will become adept at every aspect of the diversity dialog, but we must learn how to capitalize on the strengths that each of us bring to the mix.