

Diversity in the 21st century: Capturing the power of an all-inclusive definition

By Juan Johnson

A young marketing analyst was asked to organize two separate focus groups to gather opinions on how South Carolina's voters viewed democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

The first group, all Caucasian females, represented a broad economic spectrum with some on welfare, some upper-income and various levels between. Some were married, some divorced, some single or widowed. Some were parents, some were not. They were from various religious faiths and some described themselves as atheist or agnostic. Some were born in South Carolina; others were from other parts of the country and lived in the state for varying lengths of time.

The second group, all attorneys, was actually the membership committee for the local bar association. They were from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, of various ages and the group had an equal number of male and female members. They were all born in South Carolina and remarkably, attended the same private high school, undergraduate and law school. All were partners in firms that practiced corporate law and all earned more than \$200,000 a year.

Upon reviewing the young analysts' work, his manager suggested that one of the groups did not offer much diversity and that he should consider reorganizing it.

It takes little thought to recognize the potential for similar perspectives among a group of wealthy individuals from the same profession who attended the same schools, despite their differences along racial and gender lines. Yet, if someone had simply walked into the two rooms, without any other data than what they could see, they would undoubtedly have dubbed the group with 100% Caucasian females, as being less diverse. This is a simplified example of where we are regarding the concept of diversity and where we need to go.

Thanks to an industry of consultants, attorneys, activists and corporate practitioners, diversity has become synonymous with tolerance and sensitivity between people from different gender or ethnic backgrounds. To be fair, our country's history of oppression and exclusion of women and people of color gave rise to this intense focus on tolerance and sensitivity. Furthermore, there is no denying the reality that racial, ethnic and gender discrimination continues and that there are ongoing struggles with differences related to age, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, mental and physical challenges, etc.

Nevertheless, to define diversity according to these classifications of differences is to fail to recognize the uniqueness of each individual. I am an African-American man and proud to be so. However, if you were to tell me you value me, it would mean much more to me if you said you valued my creativity, my intellect, my ability to work well with people and get things done; versus saying you valued the fact that I'm an African-American man. In fact, quite frequently that is the least relevant characteristic I bring to a group.

A friend offered me the following wonderful example of valuing diversity: Several groups were engaged in a survival game exercise. On his team were several men from urban areas in the South and one woman from rural Maine. The exercise allowed an hour for the groups to prioritize 20 items needed to survive a plane crash north of the Arctic Circle. After analyzing the problem for 45 minutes, they began ranking the items. All of the team members from urban areas had been taught to purify water before drinking it; therefore, they ranked purification tablets high on their lists. However, the woman from rural Maine had a different perspective. She said the snow north of the Arctic Circle is not polluted; therefore there is no need to purify

it. They trusted her because she had different experiences, moved the purification tablets to the bottom of the list and received an almost perfect score on the test.

If asked what they valued about the woman on their team, her team members would have focused more on the knowledge and experience she brought to the group, rather than the fact that she was a female. The team was rightly focused on those diversity dimensions that could contribute to the collective objectives.

Many organizations link the words diversity and inclusion; an understandable effort to acknowledge historical exclusions and suggest change. However, when diversity is defined as fairness and equality for women and people of color, the concept itself is anything but inclusive. After all, if I'm a white male and diversity is focused only on women and people of color, what's in it for me? The unintended consequence of our historical approach to defining diversity is that it has the potential to feed polarization. We need an "all-inclusive" definition that includes white males along with every other demographic and dimension along which people are differentiated. And we need to move our focus from differences like race and gender to differences in perspectives and experiences that can help us achieve collective goals.

The exceptional leader in the 21st century will not define diversity along racial and gender lines, she will recognize the composite talents, skills, experiences and perspectives that make each individual unique and will embrace and leverage that uniqueness to benefit the collective purpose. ■



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