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Forward, Reverse or Neutral: Which Gear Are We Operating in With Our 21st Century Approach to Global Diversity and Inclusion?

Abstract

The article explores Diversity & Inclusion and the effectiveness of interventions through the eyes of an internal and an external consultant. The vehicle used for this reflection is an unconscious bias intervention within the client system, which includes education, assessment, skills development and embedding inclusion activities. It is also a reflective exploration of the parallel process experienced in the working relationship between the consultant and the client. Both the consultant and the client have different social identity groups and the article explores how these differing frames of reference and shared experiences on how diversity and inclusion work was done came into play in the working relationship. The project was designed to provide leaders with insights into their patterns of bias, and to engage the hearts and minds of leaders to generate commitment allowing the organization to more fully embrace diversity and inclusion

I Introduction

I.1 External Consultant (Helen)

I have been working in the field of Organizational Behavior with an emphasis on Global Diversity and Inclusion (D & I) since 1985. My

professional practice has been significantly influenced by my own experience with group dynamics in programs using National Training Laboratories (NTL), Tavistock, and Gestalt methodologies. My approach to work is based on Systems Theory and influenced by the contributions of Ludwig von Bertalanffy (General Systems Theory), Tajfel on the social identity theory of inter-group behavior and Gareth Morgan, who used metaphor as a way to describe the inter-dependencies within organizations or living systems. The concept of organic self-regulating systems which are responsive to feedback underpins my conversations with the client and my interventions. Over the years I have added to my depth of knowledge through the works of Social Psychologists such as Schon who espoused the concept of being a Reflective Practitioner and maintained that the best professionals know more than they can put into words and use an improvisation learned in the practice of doing their work and not just explicit rules and theories; Aronson who took Aristotle's contention that man is by nature a social animal to a new level in social psychology; Schein, whose insights into group dynamics and process consultation provided me with an essential framework and clarity when working with groups and Block whose guidelines on flawless consulting and the need to set clear boundaries around each piece of work and within each client relationship were invaluable lessons. These teachers and many more serve as an omnipresent backdrop to my work. Organizational Development and the NTL influence of experiential learning form the baseline of my design development and group facilitation. I have an overarching belief that it is our responsibility in the D & I space to create a safe learning environment. Conversely, it is morally reprehensible to allow a psychologically unsafe learning environment where participants are encouraged to share stories that may render them vulnerable and then ask them to return to a work environment where the status quo remains.

I am a White European woman of Scottish descent and an American citizen, Ralph is an African American man. We are both baby boomers. Our different world views and experiences were acknowledged early in our discussions and yet it was our shared view of "the

work” and a willingness to have open and courageous conversations across difference which facilitated the growth of our working relationship and allowed us to bring respect, integrity and a sense of humanity and meaning to the project. No one gets to be a phenomenological exception, and both Ralph and I were in clear agreement that being involved in the business of D & I also meant that we had to continue to be mindful of our own biases and messages. I was, on reflection, delighted to find a fellow traveler who understood D & I work in the terms and deep meaning that I did.

1.2 Internal Chief Diversity Officer (Ralph)

I have been in the Diversity and Inclusion space since 1988 starting out as an external consultant offering various interventions from conflict resolution to intensive experiential learning labs that were residential and could last anywhere from three to five days. My work was significantly influenced by the contributions of Roosevelt Thomas Jr. and Merlin G. Pope Jr. In 1994, I decided to try to do this work internally as a Chief Diversity Officer and have held the position with four organizations. Having worked on both sides of the fence, I have a unique insight into how best to engage with consultants in order to achieve organizational goals and that provides me with sensitivity into the dilemmas associated with being a consultant. The challenge is to value and then to appropriately leverage the skills that any one particular consultant can bring to the specific intervention.

2 First meeting

2.1 External consultant (Helen)

While the consulting work we are doing together takes place in the USA, I first met Ralph in Sydney, Australia when we were both attending a Global Diversity Benchmarking session. Our initial conversation was easy and free flowing and we quickly engaged in a discussion about D & I and the challenges people continue to face both individually, collectively and organizationally. We reflected and reminisced on how “the work” used to be done and how gut wrenching

it was to attend workshops and sessions which were not for the faint of heart. While we agreed that the D & I journey had moved on and evolved to a “lighter touch”, we also sadly and pragmatically reflected on the fact that we have not made as much progress as we would like in the ensuing years. Did all of the deep sharing across differences and the often painful exposure of people’s feelings improve or hinder our progress? Was the evolution towards a more gentle approach and ongoing attempts to include training on topics only vaguely related to diversity really progress or was it evidence that we wanted to avoid the real issues confronting us on Race, Gender, etc. It is true that personality differences (work best addressed by instruments such as MBTI, DISC, etc.) and “diversity of thought” are all part of our diversity and yet, we both had a deep and intuitive knowing that the scars of the exclusion of social identity and the pathologies of not being understood and being asked to assimilate and fit in continue to undermine real progress.

2.2 Internal Chief Diversity Officer (Ralph)

During my conversations with Helen it became immediately apparent that her philosophy regarding this work was consistent with mine, which is: people should always get what they came for and you should never take a person someplace that they can’t come back from. Stated differently, D & I efforts should be challenging and yet do no harm. I was also impressed with Helen’s body of work, since she has done this work in very difficult circumstances as well as in those that are far less challenging. In my efforts to do D & I work, I have often found myself confronted with two distinct barriers: experience, which is related to the absence of historical context for each diverse group and the second, resistance. In some respects, they feed one another and lend themselves to barriers being erected that are often hard to penetrate. The experience door swings both ways because entering into various diverse group discussions causes me to confront the fact that my depth of experience varies across cultures and social identity groups, e.g., race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and generational, etc. The more limited my experience, the

greater my uncertainty and the reverse is true as well. The other side of the experience continuum gap is related to the amount of experience participants have with engaging in D & I work. The less experience they have in the space, the greater is the potential for resistance. The more secure and less threatened participants feel the more likely they are to engage. Conversely, the more unsafe the environment feels the less likely they are to be open to sharing or learning. When seeking a partnering relationship with a consultant I am looking for that level of understanding as the basis of our working relationship.

3 History and Reflections on the Diversity and Inclusion journey

Before exploring current and future trends in the D & I space, it is appropriate to pause and reflect on why the work started; how it was received then and where it is today.

NTL and T-Groups addressed diversity issues in the late 60's through the early 80's. Early attempts at diversity training were a hybrid of the T-Group experiential learning that at times had a confrontational element built in to the design. The intent was to teach people through their pain and sharing stories. The US Military Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute conducted training in the early 70's designed to expose and then manage people's biases. As intense and effective as the earlier approach to D & I training could be, there was also a significant amount of bad publicity and backlash to consultants who accused White leaders of being racist and caused them to participate in exercises designed to demean them. The FAA was involved in a lawsuit where they had to pay damages to employees who suffered mental anguish from such exercises (Epstein, 2013). Diversity & Inclusion as an industry and as a corporate initiative has evolved from the 1990's where Diversity Awareness Training was considered the leading edge to 2012 where Unconscious Bias training is the new leading edge (Greenwald & Banaji, 2011; Wood & Sojo, 2012; Davidson, 2009; Turnbull, 2011). Cook Ross (2011) points out that an awareness of unconscious bias (as a workplace issue) invites us to fundamentally rethink the way we ap-

proach Talent Management, Strategic Decision Making, Inclusion and Organizational Culture.

During our early discussions Ralph and I agreed that doing D & I work in the earlier years was not for the faint of heart as it was often gut-wrenching work and most certainly pulled at the emotional heart strings of participants and facilitators alike. It was enlightening and in some cases life-changing but it also extracted a toll on participants, who were asked to tell their stories and then return to work environments that were not always ready to make the shift to being more inclusive (Thomas, 1990). The fact that organizations were not prepared to make the necessary shifts in culture continues to speak to the reality of accountability. The limiting factors to the change process therefore include not only the organizations' willingness and ability to change, but the consultants' skill to influence and encourage forward movement.

Is creating an inclusive work environment the way to remove the pain? During the L.A. Riots, Rodney King asked the question "Why can't we all just get along" and yet if we were to achieve that goal would we have arrived at Diversity & Inclusion Nirvana? One of the struggles I increasingly wrestle with is whether the best we can ever have is peaceful co-existence? Is the concept of arriving at a fully inclusive work place, or indeed society, reaching for the Stars when the best we can hope to do is land on the Moon? Is it really possible to be inclusive or are we hard-wired as humans to prefer affinity to difference; and lip service and political correctness to embracing diversity?

There is also the argument to be made that causing people to talk about their differences in order to close the chasms of misunderstanding is neither desirable nor productive. Bateson (1958) refers to this complexity of communication as schismogenesis and defined it as "a *process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals* (Bjorn, 2010). Bateson contended that schismogenesis could become part of any 'communication system' or 'communication relationship' where individuals or groups interact. Group interaction is often complex and

convoluted. Bateson believed that schismogenesis in communication can easily – almost unavoidably – lead to extremities and therefore to pathological states (Thomassen, 2010). Martin Davidson on the other hand believes that companies should leverage differences in order to succeed:

“Differences are present in employees, customers, suppliers, local communities ... Success comes not from shying away from these differences, but from fiercely and skillfully capitalizing on them.” (...) (Davidson, M. 2012, p. 4)

Having worked in this field since 1985 it is my experience that we do not fully understand the innumerable ways we commit micro-cosmic exclusionary behaviours on a daily basis. In addition we do not connect these exclusionary behaviours to the impact they may have on people who have different social identity groups from our own. Simple examples such as who we look at, who we acknowledge, whose voice is heard as credible, who we shake hands with, and what tone of voice we use when we address people are all interpreted by the receiver through the lens of diversity-complexity. Wing Sue (2010) describes them as micro-aggressions.

“These everyday occurrences may on the surface appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as “small slights”, but research indicates they have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of marginalized groups (p. 3).”

Steele (2010) refers to the coping mechanisms necessary to sustain and brace against the impact of these “small slights” as “Identity Contingencies” and contends that all sub-cultural groups suffer from having to adjust their style to cope. These subtle behaviours send messages of inclusion or exclusion. It requires significant work to understand inclusion and to grasp the significance of the impact and price people pay when they experience these small slights again and again. Theories and new ideas abound, including the view that

perhaps we should not be looking at diversity programs at all or asking people to talk about differences (Davidson, 2012; Thomassen, 2012), but the fact remains that no matter what we call it, no matter where corporations spend their money; no matter how the next new trendy program is packaged, the work remains unfinished, unresolved and incomplete. Regardless of geographical differences the same systemic patterns present themselves around the world - the nuances may be different but the underlying pathologies and challenges remain.

4 The consulting process

Ralph contracted with me to work with 38 members of his North America Diversity Council which is made up of senior leaders and key employees. He explained that the Regional Diversity Council's were relatively new and in the early stages of development and their charter is to move the D & I agenda forward in each region. This event would be their second meeting and he wanted to provide them not only with an education on unconscious bias, but also with the leverage and momentum to develop a strategic direction. He was interested in using our Unconscious Bias Program – “Adjusting Your Mirrors” to provide the Council with personal and collective insights into their patterns of bias.

Ralph and I worked together in an iterative process to design the workshop and customize the assessment tool. The “Adjusting Your Mirrors” – Unconscious Bias Program takes a systemic approach to organizational change and provides a combination of educational awareness and personal and collective insights using “Cognizant”, an Unconscious Bias assessment tool to provide feedback to participants on their individual and organizational patterns of bias. The academic principles behind the assessment tool are based on George Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology. Kelly (1970) believed that we all create our own reality and that the one thing we do consistently is move towards people and things we like and away from people and things we do not like and “Cognizant” is custom designed to enable people to reflect on these preferences relative to diverse groups.

Berger & Luckmann (1967) in their seminal work on Social Construction Theory explore our tendency as humans to socially construct stories to reflect our own realities and the fact that we habitualize behaviors which drop unconsciously into the background. The intent is to bring these tendencies into the light and to provide leaders with the key insights and connections necessary to gain momentum and leverage for the D & I initiative. It was important therefore to ensure that the behaviors included in the tool are the ones that Ralph felt would really work and would help to bring relevant insights to the group.

4.1 Reflections on Customization (Ralph)

As we worked on the groups and related behaviors, the most important aspect was making sure that the behaviors were relevant to the experiences of the employees we were working with. On the one hand, there had to be a universal component to the behaviors but, at the same time, I didn't want them to be as broad as to be discounted as not applicable. When doing D & I work, it is easy for individuals to look for excuses not to do the difficult aspects of this work and my fear was that if they could find a reason to discount applicability, then it might be easier for individuals to look for the escape routes. This is not to say that our employees did not want to do the work. It was more about my fears based upon years of seeing people discount various tools because of something that didn't fit. I wanted to experience the process as our employees would and, to that end, I took the assessment and participated in the feedback process with Helen. Going through the process also gave me greater comfort with the tool as well as an enhanced ability to explain and defend the tool's content. Despite my years in the business, and my depth of knowledge, I found myself rationalizing certain results, and that insight was invaluable because it afforded me an opportunity to think clearly about how I would support others as they struggled with their results.

4.2 Debrief interviews (Helen)

As the individual interviews are confidential I cannot share any specifics, but I can share that there were familiar patterns emerging. The presenting issues ranged from the challenges of being a woman or Person of Color at work to being a member of the dominant culture as a heterosexual, able-bodied White male. Questions surfaced from each interview that told me how thoughtful people were being about this complex and often times difficult subject. Without naming them as such, issues of assimilation, political correctness, internalized oppression, stereotype threat and identity contingency became the focus of our conversations (Steele (2011), McIntosh (1988), Lipsky (1987) Turnbull (2006, 2010, 2011)). The juxtapositions were palpable. White women thinking out loud about their role in the diversity story and hoping to find a legitimate place on the Diversity Council; White men wanting to understand their dominance and at the same time not wanting to be misunderstood; People of Color distancing themselves from their own culture in order to fit in and at the same time being clear that nothing they did would allow them to fully fit in and everyone striving to find out what being inclusive of diversity could really look like.

In designing the assessment tool I did so with the view that if I provided the canvas the artist would be free to paint the picture. It is important to create a safe environment for people to feel that they can muse out loud and share their stories. As I listened to each person's stories, experiences and perspectives it was validating to know that the picture they saw in front of them elicited and evoked their memories, both good and bad, and at the same time I was conflicted in knowing that the stories in many cases spoke to the deeper and unresolved pathologies of diversity and inclusion work. As I listened to each person I was acutely aware of the layers of complexity unfolding and the fact that I do not get to be a phenomenological exception. Each person's story grabbed at heart strings attached to a piece of my own journey; whether it was my identification as a White European woman, wondering how I could fit in to the diversity story, wondering if I would be seen as credible by People of Color and White men, or it was in the shared pain of exclusion or the anxiety of owning dominance and wondering how to do that gracefully. Kelly (1970)

refers to humans as “personal scientists” and Aristotle is quoted as saying that the “unexamined life is not worth living”. I believe the answer to the art and practice for me, of being a social psychologist is found in the field of cybernetics and my ability to move into observer role – observing self and others, and the recognition that while I am experiencing something I am also observing myself experiencing it.

5 Interventions and micro-cosmic moments that make a difference

One of the things that Ralph and I discussed was the desire to create a meaningful experience without necessarily returning to the style of the 90's. How could we take the group to a place of meaning and awareness without raising the level of emotion in the room to a potentially uncomfortable level? That question played in the back of my mind and became a back drop as we started the session.

Day 1 consisted of the Unconscious Bias awareness workshop and the Cognizant group results. These results showed the Diversity Council their collective patterns of bias on gender, culture/race, generational and sexual orientation. There was a lot of interest in the results and one of the critical points in the meeting came when the comparison chart for White American and African American was discussed. This chart showed a significant gap in perception between the two groups with African Americans being seen as less likely to demonstrate leadership on all of the behaviors measured. There was a deafening silence in the room for a few seconds as people dropped their eyes to the floor and shifted uncomfortably in their seats. The first person to speak was a senior White male who asked a question of clarification about the statistics driving the results. At that point I saw the disbelief and disconcerted angst on the faces of some of the African Americans in the room and socially constructed my version of their discomfort from the restimulation of past experiences. Fifteen years ago what I would have said next would have been different, but today I responded to the question by assuring the questioner that the data was statistically relevant and referring him and the group back to the issue at hand. What did

they think of the results; what did it say to them about opportunities for African Americans in the company and what were they going to do about it?

Because I had interviewed everyone in the room I knew there were stories and perspective that, if shared, could deepen awareness and enhance learning, but I was acutely aware that it was not up to me to share them. I could only create a safe space and then wait. In the hope that I could help the group to go deeper I broke them up into triads with one Person of Color in each group and asked them to share experiences real time and to come up with suggestions for how they could improve both perceptions and realities going forward. I did not want the burden of conversation to land on the People of Color by expecting them to share their pain; my hope was that the White people would also share their vulnerability and that there would be reciprocity in the learning.

What would I have said or done differently in the 90's? Most likely I would have asked the White male to explain why he was asking the question and then I would have asked the group to respond to their reactions to hearing the original question about statistics; but on reflection I was aware of my inner voice saying "don't do that, don't go back to the 90's"; if you go there you will open up the issues and it might get too emotional; it might be out of control; it might not be a safe environment for People of Color to share how they are feeling. Was this lighter touch a safer version of the 90's or just avoidance of the issues? Could we cause change if there was no intimacy or deeper sharing? Were triads an attempt at intimacy without the incumbent large group risks? What were my issues about not going back? Had it been too painful for me also and going back there might open up old wounds. Was the earlier conversation about not replicating the 90's unconsciously putting the brakes on my facilitation decisions? Schon (1983) speaks of move-testing experiments in our process of being a Reflective Practitioner. I was now retrospectively reflecting on the move testing that I did and the move-testing that I might have done. Was the outcome of the actual move "affirmed" by the fact that the group did not get over-emotional and yet seemed to have a deeper conversation; or was it "negated" because no one became emotional? Was an emotional outburst a necessary element for creating a meaningful experience

or had we matured enough in our discussion of the topic to be able to keep it cool? I also reflected on the fact that people need time to ponder as they may be impacted in the moment and yet find their voice later.

On Day 2 we shared global benchmarking measures on D & I and asked each person to vote on where they thought the organization stood on each dimension. It was clear that there was work to be done and each Division spent most of the morning developing their action items to move their Council forward, utilizing the knowledge gained from the Unconscious Bias results and the Global Benchmarking study as their leverage points. Each group reported on an impressive list of action items and wrapped up the meeting hopeful and focused on what they needed to do to fully embrace embedding inclusion.

5.1 Helen

While we work towards creating an inclusive environment in the organization at large, right in front of us in the room we act out the micro-cosmic messages that create the cornerstones of our ongoing misunderstandings and our inability to have the courageous conversations that would move us forward. I am an ardent student of cybernetics and systems theory and love working in complex systems; I have implicit trust that when any group is in the room we are creating a microcosm of society and that all of the issues will be present if you can just create an opportunity for them to surface. I trust that rich learning can occur when we can point out the issues in the here and now and yet, I continue to ponder – was it better 15 years ago; have we given up – have we become soft in our attempts to be “more professional”. Are we helping or hurting the cause. Later that evening during dinner one of the African American participants said to the same White male who asked the question earlier “So, you hate me and my people, but you still choose to work with me”. They both laughed and moved on; almost as if it was a male bonding moment, but seen and heard through my eyes and ears it was not – it was more evidence of the pain of exclusion and the vicious circle indicative of the assimilation behaviors necessary on the part of People of Color

to clean up the earlier discomfort and attempt to make dominant culture group members feel “okay” again in order that People of Color can ensure their own ongoing psychological safety.

5.2 Ralph

When we presented the group results, which was an invaluable part of the process, the data confirmed what I have known, i.e., African-Americans are not properly positioned for success. That was also true of other groups but to a lesser degree. Another dynamic that was confirmed is the fact that White women genuinely struggle with the roles that they should play in the process. That is largely due to the fact that many have enjoyed certain aspects of privilege and when compounded with working in a conservative industry that is male-dominated, the idea of trying to dismantle some of these aspects of privilege is a bit overwhelming. Perhaps what was most important was the fact that the data did not allow for plausible deniability since this was group data that we generated.

During the course of the training/group results session, it was clear that the African-Americans were bothered with the fact that the data confirmed what was true for them in their experiences in our company. During one of the breaks, I encountered the group in a break area discussing their concerns about the training. It was clear that they were looking for those in the dominant culture to confirm/acknowledge that they both understood and were prepared to do something about the reality reflected in the data that was shared with the group. What also concerned me about their gathering was that I was afraid that we hadn’t created enough of a safe space within which they could speak more directly to the issues of concern to them. I did not want them to collude with others and thereby perpetuate the status quo. In some respects this took me back to a time when Helen and I would conduct emotionally negative exercises in order to get at the unconscious biases that individuals held. It was very important to try to get individuals to “own their own stuff” because in doing so, although it seemed to be counter intuitive, it actually created more trust bonds within the group. What

I have found, however, since the session is that some, ultimately, have found their voice and have been willing to speak up around the quality of life that they are experiencing in the organization as well as their roles in perpetuating the same. It would seem that it took time for people to process the information but ultimately it was a significant leverage point to help them find their voice.

6 Conclusions

Ralph and I both agreed that it would be imperative to stay focused on the goals that each individual and group had set for themselves and to encourage them to own the embedding inclusion activities they had committed to during the meeting. It is too easy, once the energy from a meeting fades for the waves of enthusiasm to diminish also. We did not want that to happen and Ralph has since reported that many people are continuing to work on their own action items and that a number of people from the session have found the path open for courageous conversations. The outcomes from this Unconscious Bias intervention are encouraging and hopeful, but as we both know only too well, the journey continues and will not be accomplished if we take our eye off the ball.

When we did “the work” fifteen years ago we adopted a mind-set that caused us to look for evidence that White men did not “get it” and we were quick to point out to them that they were missing the point. We encouraged an environment where women, People of Color and members of other sub-culture groups could “tell their story” with the intention of educating the dominant culture. Tears and deep emotions were often expressed on all sides of the story. We all have unconscious biases and we all have experiences and stories to tell. When it comes to key social identity issues such as race, culture, sexual orientation, religion etc. we continue to strive to assert our place in this diverse salad bowl while albeit, imperceptibly, rolling our eyes in the quiet desperation of pragmatism and having side conversations within our own cultural silos which belie the presence of inclusiveness. Today we have evolved to a kinder, gentler place, where the work is more about inclusion and less about blame. It is

clear that we need to be inclusive of everyone, and just as you cannot be a little bit pregnant, you cannot be a little bit inclusive. Managing for an inclusive environment requires that we include the perspectives of all participants and honor their need to be heard on their own terms. Blaming and defensiveness will not move us forward; opening our minds and our hearts to what we, albeit unconsciously, do to exclude and what we can do to include will be much more likely to advance Diversity & Inclusion. D & I efforts in the 21st century are still operating in forward gear, but I believe that we will always be challenged to reach the stated goal of being fully inclusive as it is an ongoing battle to overcome the brain's tendency to make our in-group much smaller than our out-group. To that end Ralph and I remain committed to having our own courageous conversations across race and gender and to enhance our understanding of how our social identity and cultural frame of reference influence our experiences and decision making process. Our personal goal is to remain vigilant of the choices we make when we consciously and unconsciously include or exclude others.

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