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Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter

Introduction

We often hear the phrase “diversity and inclusion” and wonder what it actually means. Sometimes, people question why there’s so much emphasis on diversity in today’s society. Others, who often live in communities where everyone looks alike and are of similar religions, wonder if diversity and inclusion are even relevant to their day to day activities.

What are “diversity” and “inclusion”? Why should one spend time understanding those concepts? Is there really anything a single person can do relative to fostering greater diversity and inclusion?

Diversity Defined

“Diversity” in the most basic sense is means “difference.” When used in the context of positive personal interactions, “diversity” signifies that each human is unique and that our differences should be a basis for respect and friendly curiosity rather than a reason for discrimination, ridicule, and marginalization (e.g. assigning lesser status to persons of a certain group because of who they are). Diversity most often involves recognizing that humans are different by race, gender, ethnicity, sexual or gender orientation (two different things), age, religion, economic status, and disability status.

Inclusion Defined

“Inclusion” means “including.” Trainers often refer to it as “inclusivity”—the act of actually engaging others who are different from one’s self and making an effort to include that person in either your professional or personal life or both. Inclusion puts the concept of diversity into action through personal involvement, respect, and connection. As a result of inclusivity, we begin to understand and value the ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives of others who look or sound or act differently from us. Moreover, despite our differences, inclusivity means understanding we have far more commonalities—for example, we all want our children to succeed; each of us wants to be free of physical or emotional violence; and everyone seeks a measure of personal peace. It is well recognized that organizations and communities need both diversity and inclusion to be successful.

Fear as an Inhibitor to Diversity and Inclusion

The biggest obstacle to increasing one’s exposure to diversity and inclusion is *fear*. As humans, we’re emotionally hard-wired to sort the world into categories—familiar vs. unfamiliar; friend vs. foe; family

vs. stranger. Underlying this categorizing is an intense desire to feel safe and the neurological “fight or flight” response that often arises when we’re confronted by new or unexpected circumstances. As a result of our innate fear, the tendency is to favor people who look and act like us and disfavor those who are different from us. Neuroscientists call this “implicit bias” or “unconscious bias” and because we’re hard-wired emotionally to recognize differences, we must consciously confront our biases as we interact with diverse humans and work toward including them in our professional and personal lives.

How Marginalization Impacts the Twin Cities and Minnesota

In many ways, the Twin Cities (and Minnesota as a whole) can be divided into two separate communities. One community (mainly white) has historically enjoyed political and economic power, which has meant better education opportunities, more business ownership and success, living in economically prosperous areas, and financial security. This community often is hopeful about the future.

The other community (mainly persons of color, including foreign-born persons) has historically lacked political and economic power. This community often encounters an education system that’s not geared toward addressing the unique challenges that come from having less resources and opportunity. As a result, this community often struggles economically, affecting family stability and one’s personal outlook. For many in this community, the common outlook is one of hopelessness.

Additionally, this community often faces increased interaction with law enforcement agencies and school discipline authorities. (For example, a recent study¹ revealed that Minnesotans of color are 11.5 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession even though white and black persons use the drug at similar rates.) The impact of simply having one arrest (there need not be an actual conviction) can ripple for a lifetime—employers, landlords, and other sources of opportunity may use that arrest record as a basis to deny the person access. (Which shows how everything comes back to *fear*; see the above.)

Statistics reinforce how this other community is challenged. For example, there are huge disparities in learning benchmarks between white students compared to students of color (courtesy of <http://www.mncompass.org/generation-next/overview>):

- In Minneapolis, 91% of white students enter kindergarten ready to learn compared with 59% of students of color; in Saint Paul, 93% of white students enter kindergarten meeting Saint Paul's oral literacy benchmark, compared with 68% of students of color.
- 70% of white 3rd grade students in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul region are proficient in reading compared with 38% of students of color.
- 72% of 8th grade white students in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul region are proficient in math compared with 43% of students of color.
- 84% of white students in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul region graduate from high school on time compared with 62% of students of color.
- 58% of white students graduate from a 2-year post-secondary institution (within 3 years) compared with 46% of students of color; 71% of white students graduate from a 4-year college (within 6 years) compared with 53% of students of color.

¹ See <http://www.startribune.com/aclu-report-blacks-arrested-far-more-than-whites-for-low-level-crimes/280731852/>

Consider also that of 50 states and the District of Columbia, Minnesota (the land of relatively full employment even through the Great Recession) ranks dead last in the financial gap between whites and persons of color. (<https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-highest-and-lowest-financial-gaps-by-race/9842/#main-findings>).

The backdrop against this economic reality is that population growth in the Twin Cities (and in Minnesota generally) will come not from white persons, but rather from persons of color. In the last decade, all of the metro area's growth has been attributable to people of color (in fact, the white population of the Twin Cities decreased by 24,000 between 2000 and 2010) and by 2040, two of every five of the metro's residents will be people of color.²

A 2014 study shows that the gap between white and of color has a staggering economic impact for the state; experts calculate that Minnesota's GDP would have been \$16 billion higher in 2011 if there were no racial disparities in income.³ As one business leader put it:

The business case is pretty profound for this region. All of the population growth is coming from people of color and there is a distinct disparity. If we do not help people of color succeed in educational attainment, in getting jobs, and getting higher paying jobs the we are headed toward potential major economic problems for bigger employers.

Bill McKinney, Thrivent Financial Minneapolis⁴

The bottom line is that as we've been "asleep" at the diversity and inclusion "switch." We've collectively allowed the "other community" in the Twin Cities and Minnesota to become stagnated and marginalized, meaning that unless we fundamentally change attitudes, systems, and organizations to offer greater opportunity and access, *everyone* will ultimately pay an economic price. That's on top of the societal price that comes from marginalizing whole groups of humans.

The beginning point for fundamental change is embracing the value of diversity and inclusion.

Summary

It's important to recognize that acknowledging the value of diversity and achieving greater inclusivity is a collective journey more than it is a destination. Everyone—regardless of their color or economic standing—suffers from biases that affect the way they interact with the world. The goal is to recognize this and to then consciously work to understand that we all have far more in common than we do differences. The payoff for this hard work can be a fairer and more economically vibrant state.

Simply put, there's much work—but great value—in being more diverse and inclusive.

It's time we get to work.

² See *Minnesota's Tomorrow: Equity is the Superior Growth Model*, PolicyLink Report, at 26.

<http://www.policylink.org/find-resources/library/minnesotas-tomorrow-equity-is-the-superior-growth-model>

³ Id. at 19.

⁴ Id. at 26.

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