

Diversity in Practice *why differences are important*

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Nextions



The following is an excerpt from a recent e-mail that I received from an attorney who is a frequent reader of this column: "Don't you feel that your work and your writing actually make the differences you seek to erase stand out with greater force? By continuing to focus on differences, are you not, in fact, making the differences stronger than they would be if no one discussed them?"

Since I am so often asked the questions (or similar variants) posed by this reader, this column is a response that addresses both the questions specifically as well as the implications underlying the questions.

Different people who work on diversity and inclusion vary widely on the nature of what they do, so my response is rooted in my own personal philosophy of what this work entails and how I approach it in my research, writing and consulting work.

Diversity and inclusion work is often misperceived, in my opinion, as strategically seeking to erase or minimize differences. There is nothing that I do (or plan to do) that is directed toward erasing or minimizing differences. I actually believe that the differences between us are what make us interesting and what add value to our relationships. The differences in our perspectives, our experiences, our problem-solving approaches, our identities and our skill sets allow us to contribute differently and irreplaceably to whatever we do, so what could possibly be the benefit in erasing the value of those differences?

The work of diversity and inclusion is not to do away with our differences but to do away with how we use our differences to close ourselves off from others instead of using our differences to open ourselves up to new ideas and perspectives on what we think we know.

Historically and maybe even contemporarily, we have been taught to see differences as things that divide us instead of as things that add something. If we operate in a paradigm in which differences are negative, we shy away from them because they represent risk. If we operate in a paradigm in which

differences add value to who we are, how we think and what we know, then, we actively seek out the differences.

Working in diversity and inclusion is about shifting the way we see our differences so that we seek out that which adds to our perspectives. It is not about trying to make the differences go away!

I will admit that the reader's questions reveal a flaw in how diversity and inclusion is discussed by many (including me) because most of us in this field start the dialogue in the middle of the conversation instead of talking about differences as being important after we establish a foundation of commonality.

Without establishing commonality, differences are indeed nothing but divisions that become the cause for segregation and eventually conflict. So, the questions that the reader posed are absolutely relevant when the foundation of commonality has not been established. Those of us who talk about this topic frequently should be wary of jumping into the dialogue without questioning whether we have set a basis for commonality first.

I am currently working with a law firm where I was asked to facilitate a strategic planning session on diversity and inclusion with the executive committee of the firm. The session was scheduled for 90 minutes and we spent the first 20 minutes setting the "common ground" upon which we would build the case for diversity. Only when the common values and goals of the firm were defined did we delve into diversity and inclusion. In other words, the firm's goals were the goals we were chasing and diversity and inclusion were tools with which the firm could more effectively reach its goals. Diversity and inclusion were not goals in and of themselves.

Once the common ground is set, then we can separate relevant differences from irrelevant differences. Differences in experiences that bring different perspectives to the ways in which the firm develops, retains and serves its clients are relevant. But differences in whether lawyers prefer blue ink or red ink when marking up documents are irrelevant. Differences in learning styles may be relevant in the ability to view different aspects of a legal problem, but differences in which word processing software one prefers are irrelevant. The relevance of differences relies heavily on the context of commonality. It is the commonality that makes the differences make sense.

If differences are discussed as a goal to be reached, they are sure to become liabilities to be neutralized. If, however, a common goal is established and differences (and inclusion of differences) are seen as a way to more effectively reach that common goal, then diversity and inclusion become assets.

A lot of the work that I do in organizations is the finding and the articulating of that sometimes elusive common ground because diversity and inclusion are only constructive when they are anchored in shared commonality. So, I do not try to erase differences. I just try to make differences make a difference. If someone still differs with me on this, I then simply quote the great philosopher William James who said that "[t]here are no differences but differences of degree between degrees of difference and no difference."