

IT'S BEEN A LONG ROAD WITH NO END IN SIGHT... ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BEEN ENGAGED IN EFFORTS TO ADVANCE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (I USE THE TERM 'DIVERSITY' TO MEAN THE INCLUSIVE D&I) IN THEIR RANKS AND CREATE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES FOR DECADES. THESE EFFORTS HAVE PREDOMINANTLY BEEN FOCUSED ON THE ADVANCEMENT OF HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC IDENTITIES IN THE US INCLUDING WOMEN, ETHNORACIAL MINORITIES AND SEXUAL/GENDER IDENTITY MINORITIES.

The hierarchies that exist in broader society often play out in the context of diversity efforts, thus cisgender straight white women have been the focus of most organizational diversity efforts, even when those efforts are specifically intended to benefit members of other underrepresented social identities as well. While efforts to promote women and ethnoracial minorities have been around for quite some time, efforts have intensified within organizations over the last five to ten years to ensure that LGBTQ+ people are recruited, included and promoted.

Additionally, outside of simply complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act, organizations are starting to think critically about how to recruit, develop and advance people with disabilities.

The efforts made on behalf of underrepresented social identities within organizations have ranged from programs and scholarships built to ensure the pipeline from school into organizations is and/or remains strong, affinity networks and heritage month programming for cultural support, mentorship and sponsorship, and talent development programs. While there are still some organizations not making any efforts toward advancing diversity, many organizations are putting significant financial resources toward the

effort. Organizations have collectively invested billions of dollars annually in diversity efforts.

The financial resources and efforts advancing diversity haven't yielded progress commensurate with the investments made. Correcting the results of matrixed societal and sociological problems in an organizational setting with a profit motive is a complex and gargantuan task. With every passing year and each corporate initiative where business leaders pledge their cause to diversity without significant result, diversity fatigue can ensue. Diversity fatigue is a phenomenon where mostly non-diverse leaders and organizations that invest significant time, energy and resources into diversity initiatives quickly tire from those efforts. The irony of diversity fatigue, and critical to the concept, is that diversity and bias are often on the minds of diverse people and organizations; however, non-diverse people are often overwhelmed from minimal exposure to diversity-related issues. Diversity fatigue is real, and in a world that is becoming increasingly diverse, especially in the next generation workforce, consumer population, etc., it is critical that organizations find ways to persevere and engage with diversity in a way that makes organizations relevant to their various constituencies.

THE PEOPLE ARE WEARY

My experience is that diverse people are immersed in conversations about diversity all the time. DuBois' double consciousness is as real today as it was in the 1900's when he was the leading race theorist and sociologist of his day. People with underrepresented social identities constantly navigate two worlds: the world that exists as they understand it and the world of the majority that they have to navigate as people with underrepresented social identities. This means that people with underrepresented social identities tend to be much more comfortable talking about diversity than those in the majority who talk about diversity less often and less directly. Additionally, people without underrepresented social identities haven't learned language that allows them to engage in diversity discourse, and when they do engage, my experience is that they feel they cannot do so without penalty or possible retribution. While more comfortable for many people with underrepresented social identities, talking about diversity in a corporate setting is a completely new world for many people without underrepresented social identities. They haven't developed the muscle, language or desire to deal with the constant psychological and sociological dissonance of having to traverse two worlds in the same way people with underrepresented social identities must to survive. Engaging in a world where organizations are requiring leaders to think about diversity in all aspects (e.g., hiring, assignments, promotions, development, investments, decision-making, leadership opportunities, and other interactions, etc.) feels overly exhausting to those that haven't developed the stamina to run that race. Further, other than direct engagement from clients or other compelling constituents requiring social identity diversity, there is very little that is tangible to people without underrepresented social identities that will keep them advocating

for social identity diversity. In other words, many people without underrepresented social identities tire of diversity efforts quickly given the multitude of factors that ensure progress moves at a glacial pace. Diversity fatigue is real. And organizations are feeling that diversity fatigue acutely, even as diversity initiatives are starting to be pushed forward by a broader population of individuals.

Despite the national political rhetoric, most large organizations' arcs are bent toward increased diversity, whether it is coming from an authentic moral desire and/or for financial benefit. The recognition that corporate diversity efforts aren't going away combined with diversity fatigue leads to some creativity in approach, paradoxically expressed by an old adage: if you can't beat them, join them. In other words, if efforts and energy are going to go toward advancing diversity, then people without underrepresented social identities should benefit too. And the best way to do this without seemingly subverting the moral and business cases for diversity that so many organizations are bandwagoning, is to frame the effort in such a way that people without underrepresented social identities are now diverse. I posit that one significant way that this is being done is to advance cognitive diversity.

A GET OUT OF JAIL FREE CARD?

Cognitive diversity has been defined in many different ways, but is generally characterized by differences in perspective, ways of processing information and/or approaches taken to solving problems. Many believe (including me) that cognitive diversity can be informed and achieved by the inclusion of those with underrepresented social identities; some have found that there is no correlation between cognitive diversity and underrepresented social identities.

Most would agree that every single individual has a unique perspective due to different

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social environments, education, media consumption, parenting, life experiences, etc. When we consider diversity as a matter of perspective, we are considering diversity in a highly individualized way. In my view, this is very palatable to the American psyche, which is, at its core, about the essence of individualism: the ability of anyone to succeed if they are diligent and work hard. For those with diversity fatigue or who need to demonstrate progress on diversity, a focus on cognitive diversity is appealing. Anyone can be cognitively diverse. A focus on cognitive diversity does not require those in power and/or that benefit from social identity privilege to wrestle with thorny issues that feel historical but are present and impact many facets of our daily lives. Taking cognitive diversity into account means that the focus can be on the group that has often been excluded from most traditional diversity efforts: heterosexual cisgender white able-bodied men (or more specifically, those who did not identify with any underrepresented social identity). Even the head of diversity of a major company has said that "12 white, blue-eyed, blonde men in a room" can be diverse. In that universe, given the number of people without underrepresented social identities, this theory is enough to advance diversity. Hands clean. Problem solved.

THE FELONY IS STILL ON YOUR RECORD

That head of diversity has rescinded her comments and apologized. In many envi-

ronments, including in American corporate environments, it's simply not true. Even if every single one of those individuals had different experiences, none of them has presumably had the experience of being an underrepresented social identity in America, which is an experience that offers a perspective like none other. Regardless of other factors, social identity matters.

If you don't agree with that, then there is always the business case. In the legal diversity space, our clients are getting very granular, wanting specific social identity information of the individuals in the organizations that serve them, including who is working on their matters and what their roles are by hours and amounts. In our arena, we know that there are qualified diverse people that are capable of doing the work. Telling our clients we have 12 white, blue-eyed, blonde men working on their matters is no longer acceptable. They grade us against other service providers that work for them and they want to know, where is our underrepresented social identity diversity? In a world where visibility of diversity efforts is key, social identity diversity generally has that visibility while cognitive diversity is difficult to display.

Columbia Business School Professor Kathy Phillips has done significant research about the real benefit of diversity, including diversity on the basis of social identity. People that are diverse on the basis of social identity not only have unique perspectives that make a meaningful, substantive difference if the environment is



inclusive but they also spur people without underrepresented social identities to think differently and not rely on confirmation bias, groupthink, and intellectual laziness.

Aside from that, reliance on cognitive diversity is an easy way to undermine traditional diversity efforts. And there are some that argue that social identity diversity has no impact on cognitive diversity at all. As a person that lives and works at the margins of several social identities, in particular race, gender and sexual orientation and having been in many elite and non-elite organizations, people that identify with underrepresented social identities don't always think differently (because no group always does anything) but often does: our organizational cultures have not yet developed

enough to ensure that everyone's voices are heard and valued.

IN A WORLD OF LIMITED RESOURCES, SOCIAL DIVERSITY MATTERS

Both social identity diversity and cognitive diversity matters, and ideally one should not supplant or be used to undercut the legitimacy of the other. If we want to create inclusive environments with the best outcomes for our organizations, we would ideally pay attention to both social identity diversity and cognitive diversity. Unfortunately, cognitive diversity can take the air out of the room. It is more difficult to identify and has no easily discernible benchmarks. It is easier to swallow, though. It generally

doesn't require the same tenor and level of hard decision-making in terms of resource allocation, difficult conversations, examining systems and processes and introspection that social identity diversity does. If you rely on cognitive diversity, and decide that is all the diversity you need, the focus on social identity diversity could decrease to an amount that is not meaningful, and worse, will signal to underrepresented social identities that their existence and contributions do not matter.

As people that understand unconscious, subconscious, or implicit bias (or whatever you choose to call it) and see the resulting population, investment and advancement inequities that are present in our organizations, we understand two things: (1) it is challenging work to advance social identity diversity and many personnel in our organizations don't have the language, facility, comfort or knowledge to have meaningful conversations about difference let alone the practical strategies to be able to make a difference, even when they want to (which is why diversity professionals exist) and (2) a focus on cognitive diversity allows organizations to feel facially successful in their diversity efforts, while avoiding the difficult conversations and decisions that cut to the root of who we all are.

In organizations that are in a business outside of the realm of social justice, the time, commitment, energy, financial and other resources involved in advancing diversity is often limited. We need to choose the best approach. We should choose to advance social identity diversity, given (1) the corporate and public clamoring for diversity, (2) the unique benefits of social identity diversity lead to better individual, team and organizational results, (3) the understanding that our organizations have cultures and/or processes that lead to inequitable results, and (4) that we exist in organizations with competing priorities without enough resources.

I identify as a Black bisexual woman, making me a member of three primary underrepresented social identities, and there is likely some margin of bias in my preference for advocating for social identity diversity. As a person whose primary vocation is to advance diversity within organizations leveraging talent to best achieve organizational objections, putting underrepresented social identities at the forefront makes sense.

Everything we do is inherently relational: how we assign work, how we develop business, how we offer meaningful advice, mentoring, sponsorship, who we think of first for a new opportunity, who we take to lunch, who we tell the unwritten rules. Implicit bias is in all of us, and it impacts all of the choices we make that impact the development and advancement of talent in our organizations. Until we get to the point where we have developed systems that completely eliminate the human element, which is nearly impossible, a focus on underrepresented social identities will be critical.



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