WHITEPAPER

Check Your Diversity Blind Spots

by Joe Gerstandt

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Take a moment to consider the following questions, and then consider how your fellow association board members might answer them:

- What do diversity and inclusion mean to you?
- More important, what do they mean to you within the context of your role as a volunteer leader?
- Do you see diversity and inclusion as sources of value for your association?
- If so, what are the most effective ways to pursue that value?

Now think about posing those same questions to your fellow board members. As that conversation moved around the room, would there be a great deal of clarity and consistency?

Diversity and inclusion are two of the most poorly understood issues in the world of organizational and individual performance today. While so much has changed about how we work, organize, communicate, and create value, little has changed regarding our understanding of and approach to diversity and inclusion. This is increasingly costly to us as individuals and as organizations. The time has come for a larger and deeper conversation about diversity and inclusion - a more relevant and action-oriented conversation.

For your association to reset its outlook on diversity and inclusion, I suggest two distinct bodies of work:

- Understand blind spots. Make sure your association has clarity about what diversity and inclusion mean as well as the role that difference plays in relationships and decision making, regardless of our intentions.
- Aim for sweet spots. Proactively and aggressively seek out new sources of value, directly connected to diversity and inclusion.

Before we discuss these strategies in detail, let's start with our language.

Diversity Means Difference

Maybe the greatest challenge facing this body of work today is that, while we might be using the same words, we are all talking about something different when we consider diversity and inclusion. If stakeholders do not know what diversity and inclusion actually mean, let alone why they matter, it is not very reasonable for us to expect them to integrate them into their actions and their leadership. I'm reminded of a favorite quote of mine from Dan and Chip Heath, authors of Made to Stick and Switch: "What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity."

Simply put, diversity means difference. It does not mean race relations, gender, affirmative action, quotas, compliance, or sensitivity. Those things are all a part of the larger conversation, but diversity means difference, and difference takes many forms. We are not likely to have much luck examining issues related to race or gender or age or faith without understanding difference itself and some of its key characteristics.

We can be different from each other in many ways, but the key words here are "from each other." This is important because diversity is relational in nature, existing within the context of relationships. Diversity, or difference, exists between people, not in people. This is why diversity and inclusion work is largely about the nature of our relations with others as individuals, teams, and organizations. This is also why diversity, properly understood, is relevant to every single one of us, because it exists in every single interaction that you have with another person.

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Diversity is also a catalyst. It drives change because it always brings tension, and when you introduce tension into a social group—whether it is a family, a team, or an organization—you change some of the patterns of behavior within that social group. Organizations with greater diversity consistently either underperform or overperform compared to organizations with less diversity, the difference being how the organization responds to difference and the accompanying tension. Some social groups try to reject difference, intentionally or unintentionally, and some groups are able to embrace it and benefit from it. This brings us to inclusion.

Inclusion is simply your capacity to include difference, keeping in mind that difference takes many forms and always brings tension. Inclusion is activist, requiring more than simply "not doing bad things" or having the right kinds of intentions. Organizations and other social groups have very conformist and exclusive tendencies, so to become more inclusive requires us to be deliberate and proactive. It does not matter what your intentions, feelings, beliefs, or aspirations are as an individual or as a group if there is no action to support them. This is where much of the disconnect lives regarding diversity and inclusion. Many organizations and their leaders say wonderful things regarding these issues and have the right intentions, but because they do not understand diversity and inclusion, they are not proactive and not very inclusive.

Beyond having clarity on the language and logic of diversity and inclusion, your biggest opportunities for improvement lie in pursuing the two distinct strategies of blind spots and sweet spots.

Blind Spots

Part of our misunderstanding of diversity and inclusion has to do with flawed and antiquated beliefs regarding human beings. We have some serious blind spots about human nature and how we make decisions about each other. We cling to the idea that we are rational and logical beings, making rational and logical decisions based on the evidence before us, and that as long as we have decent intentions, diversity and inclusion really do not matter. Just hire the best person for the job, right? Well, the truth is that we are not actually very good at doing that, and if we do want to be good at hiring the best person for the job, we have to understand the dynamics of diversity and have some appreciation for human nature and social dynamics.

A growing mountain of evidence from the fields of behavioral economics, neuroscience, social cognition, and social psychology shows us that, regardless of what our intentions may be, we simply are not "color blind." We are also not blind to gender, appearance, age, height, or any other visual cues that we are presented with when we interact with each other, and those cues factor heavily in the many automatic decisions we make about each other.

We like the idea of being nonjudgmental and "not judging a book by its cover," because, as we all know, good people are not judgmental. This is a highly inaccurate idea. One thing that the human brain is extremely good at it is being a ruthless and relentless judge. It has to be in order to conserve energy and still be able to process all of the information that it is bombarded with.

We like to believe that things like assumptions, categories, labels, and stereotypes only affect other people, but they are all part of how we navigate the social terrain around us, how we figure out how to relate to others, and how we interpret the behavior of others.

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We humans have a strong inclination to like people who are more like us culturally, professionally, or personally. Being open and honest about this predisposition allows us to be more conscious of our unconscious tendencies that influence our behavior and our decision making. We shouldn't overlook or deny differences; rather, we want to take a proactive stance so that our judgments, assumptions, and implicit associations about difference do not get in the way of identifying, engaging, and retaining talent. Being judgmental is not about being a bad person; it's about being human. As an association leader, you have to be proactive about reducing its impact on the performance of your board and your organization.

We cannot change something we do not acknowledge, and there the evidence suggests that we have room for improvement. For example, the 2007 Corporate Leavers Survey, conducted by the Level Playing Field Institute, showed that people of color and gay and lesbian professionals were two to three times more likely to cite workplace unfairness as the only reason for leaving their employers than heterosexual Caucasian men. The survey estimated the cost to U.S. business for unfair treatment of existing employees at $64 billion dollars per year, which shows just how badly we need a real understanding of diversity and inclusion.

Some of this unfairness is intentional, but I see a lot of it as unintentional and as a good reminder that it is not enough to "not hate." If your association wants to be world class in this arena, it must integrate serious diversity and inclusion philosophy, practice, and policy into its culture and operations. You need to be proactive in discovering your blind spots in order to reduce the impact of assumptions, implicit associations, attribution errors, and other ways in which your considerations of others can easily be skewed.

Sweet Spots

In addition to recognizing your blind spots, you have an opportunity to tap into several unique sources of value, or sweet spots, associated with diversity and inclusion.

Demographic reach. For starters, population demographics and the workforce profile are changing and will continue to change. 51% of new entrants into the workforce between 1994 and 2005 were part of a minority population, and 62% were women, according to the Hudson Institute. If your organization is not good at attracting, engaging, and retaining women and people of color as employees and members, you are competing for a shrinking portion of what is available. We are also on the front end of an unprecedented generational transition, which, despite being slowed by economic concerns, will still happen. A great deal of expertise and experience will be leaving our organizations, and the result will be increased volatility in leadership and organizational culture, placing greater significance on an organization's capacity to engage and effectively communicate with all generational cohorts in the workplace.

Sweet spot no. 1 is about the number of people you are able to reach out to. If you want to be an appealing organization to the largest pool of people possible, diversity is a part of the equation.

Three steps toward this sweet spot:

- Provide solid education and development programs for staff and volunteers to increase understanding of the dynamics of diversity and reduce impact of unconscious bias.
- Analyze the demographics of your organization, considering trends and ways in which thosedemographics may depart from industry, national, or global demographics.
- Encourage and support stakeholders—especially you and your fellow board members—to proactively integrate their personal and professional networks of relationships.

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Intersections of difference. How we create value and pursue competitive advantage is also changing. Increasingly, competitive advantage depends upon creativity and innovation. We entertain some cultural myths about innovation being driven by the lone scientist or the lone genius, but research tells us that innovation happens at intersections.

It happens when different professions, organizations, disciplines, cultures, and so forth come together around a problem or opportunity.

Sweet spot number two is about driving innovation. Are you creating intersections where different kinds of people collide?

Three steps toward this sweet spot:

- Seek out ways to interact with people from different associations and different industries through formal or informal communities of practice and network groups.
- Recruit new stakeholders (staff, members, board members, and so on) from places that do not make sense. Bring different world views, perspectives, and experiences inside.
- Create more intersections inside your organization to reduce the impact of silos. Mix people up via social events, mentoring, job shadowing, and cross-functional teams.

Functional disagreement. Cognitive diversity (or difference in thinking styles) is a key ingredient of better problem solving and decision making in a group or organization. As with other kinds of difference, we tend to pay attention to and surround ourselves with people that think like us, but if we want to improve our problem solving and decision making, we will have to push back on that.

Sweet spot number three is about better decision making and problem solving. Even if we already have differing points of view at the table, they are often not being shared. A big part of this work is about being better at disagreeing in a healthy and functional way.

Three steps toward this sweet spot:

- Educate staff and leaders about decision making, conformity, group dynamics, and how high the cost of conformity can be.
- Get in the practice, as an organization, of talking about the capacity for talking straight to one another and valuing different perspectives.
- Put simple and consistent ground rules in place for how to disagree respectfully and set the example.

Your Opportunity

Diversity exists in every single interaction that you have with another human being, whether that person is a friend, coworker, client, or fellow board member. Even though diversity is a fundamental component of nearly every aspect of our personal and professional lives, it remains terribly misunderstood. You can help position your association to thrive in the 21st century through understanding the blind spots associated with diversity and inclusion and pursuing the robust opportunities at the sweet spots.

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