The Changing Landscape of Diversity

By Patricia Pope

Why does diversity continue to represent such a challenge for most individuals and organizations? Quite simply, it is very difficult to understand someone else's reality that isn't yours – because it's not yours. It is so hard to accept the fact that while everyone is walking down the same hallways, all experience life at work very differently based on who they are.

To begin to understand the changing landscape of diversity and the current challenges most organizations face in this area, it is first necessary and even instructive to understand the evolution of the "language" in which this topic has been discussed over the years since its birth in the 1960s. The term "diversity" has become such a commonly used word in our everyday conversations, yet it is a word that is frequently and greatly misunderstood.

For many, diversity is just another name for affirmative action or a code word for the broad topic of race and gender. During more than three decades, organizations have struggled to become more "diverse," while the discussion continues to polarize. White males tend to believe that affirmative action gives women and people of color an unfair advantage in hiring and promotion. The facts do not support these perceptions. In 2005, Fortune 500 companies had an average of 21.8 officers. Of these positions, only 3.6 were held by women; occupied only 9.4 percent of "clout" titles (those higher than vice president). Worse, people of color held only 1.4 percent and 6.4 percent of those corporate officer positions, respectively, according to Catalyst.

Affirmative action was a concept that was intended to create more "visible" representation of those who previously had been excluded. In 1977, the term "diversity" was coined by the late Merlin G. Pope, Jr., my husband and partner in Pope & Associates and a Yale-educated sociologist, to refer to the changing demographics of the U.S. workforce. He intended that white males be included in the term "diversity." Wanting to get past the issue of numbers and representation, he hoped to focus instead on how to address the barriers to "inclusion" so that all might contribute to their

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fullest potential.

Today, the new buzz words are "engagement" and "cultural competencies." Engagement is clearly a problem for business.

Research by the Gallup organization surveying more than 100,000 American employees indicated that 55 percent are "not engaged," meaning that they are physically present at work but not really "there" mentally or emotionally. Even more troubling was the finding that 19 percent are "actively disengaged": not only are they unhappy, they spend a good part of their day talking to their co-workers about how discontented they are.

Cultural competence, a term that originated in the healthcare industry, refers to the growing recognition that those in medicine need a better understanding of cultural differences in order to provide competent care for patients regardless of nationality, language, customs, beliefs, values and expectations. This term is now being used to refer to challenges in other fields, including education, and to working globally as well as workforce development in general.

What does all of this mean, in a practical sense, for most organizations today? The reality is that most organizations are still struggling, 41 years after the creation of "affirmative action," to achieve a workforce balance that reflects the demographics of our society, especially at the middle to senior levels of management. Does this mean affirmative action has failed? Hardly. As President Bill Clinton has stated, "Mend it, but don't end it."

Diversity is the noun that refers to the make-up of any workforce. Even within a workforce consisting entirely of white males, great diversity exists in terms of age, educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs, to name just a few. Thus diversity is not just for use regarding racial and gender differences.

Inclusion, the verb in this vernacular, refers to the proactive behaviors necessary to reduce the barriers, both subtle and overt, that negatively affect employee development and performance. Diversity does not *automatically* result in inclusion. If we don't proactively work to include, we unintentionally exclude.

Cultural competencies, in the broadest sense, refer to the knowledge and skills that are required to fully engage all employees so that they will do their best work every day and enable the organization to deliver quality results to clients, patients, customers and consumers, locally, nationally and globally.

The term "valuing diversity" is frequently used to indicate support for the goal of broad representation. Yet the reality is that for many organizations, differences are, at best, tolerated. I know of organizations that have been seriously working to achieve and appreciate diversity for many years -- some since the late 1960s or early 1970s -- and I am glad to say that they are making strides in learning how to effectively "manage differences." Perhaps one of the most significant paradoxes of the diversity movement is that diversity won't really be valued until it is experienced as *adding* value....and it is very difficult to *add* value when one doesn't *feel* valued.

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A participant in a diversity class in the 1980s provided the best analogy to make this point. In a "fishbowl" exercise, the African-American participants were sitting in a circle in the middle of the room, while the white participants sat on the outside of this circle. The inner circle participants had been talking for several hours about what it was like to grow up in their city and their experiences working in their company. The purpose of this exercise is to help others understand a reality that is not their own. The primary rule of the exercise is that those on the outside are to listen, writing down any questions they have for the subsequent debrief session.

One of the white male participants politely raised his hand during the "fishbowl" conversation and said, "I'm sorry for interrupting, but I just need to say that I've been listening now for several hours, and I'm really struggling here trying to understand how I could grow up in this town and work in this company and not see any of the things going on that you all have been talking about. I just don't understand how that is possible, but please continue."

The African-American participants continued their conversation for another 45 minutes or so, until the same white male raised his hand again. "Telephone poles!" he said. Everyone stared, having no idea what he was talking about. "I drive down the streets in this town," he explained, "and I notice every single telephone pole. Why? I used to work for the phone company. You all probably drive down those same streets every day and never notice the telephone poles. It doesn't mean that they're not there. They just aren't a part of your reality. I think I'm beginning

to understand how it's possible that you can have all of these experiences, yet I've never seen them."

These "telephone poles" continue to exist in most, if not all, organizations today. Here's how it often goes. A white male joins a new organization, or a new team within an organization, and experiences some negative aspect in the work environment. Chances are, he'll tell himself, "I guess that's just the way it is around here." An African-American person joins the organization or team, and experiences the same thing. Chances are, she or he will ask, "Did that happen because of who I am?" While some may perceive this as being overly sensitive, it is often a rational question to ask, given the accumulation of life experiences as someone who is different. Often, though, African Americans will seek a reality check by talking to others like themselves, asking whether they, too, have had this experience. Usually the answer is "yes." Eventually, the issue will surface and when it does, the white males will typically say, "I had that same experience here, so you are wrong to assume that this was a racial issue." The African Americans feel discounted and believe that it *IS* different for them, but to continue pushing the conversation may have negative consequences. They drop it, but they don't feel any better.

Two important lessons are to be learned from this common dynamic that can lead to increased understanding, more "engaged" employees and a healthier organizational culture for everyone.

1) While the unhealthy norms of an organization's culture will likely be felt by most employees, their experiences may be "the same, but different." For example, the African Americans may say that every time they get a new assignment, they feel that they are "tested" and have to "prove" themselves all over again. White males will say, "I get tested too!" However, the nature of the testing, the duration or the frequency may be very different. If the underlying assumption is that one will "pass" the test, it is often just a matter of "checking the box." On the other hand, if this positive assumption isn't made, the experience will likely be very different.

2) The bottom line for the organization is that this *is* an unhealthy norm that is affecting performance and productivity. Discounting the situation because it doesn't appear to be racially based allows it to continue to exist. Look deeper into the situation and you just may find it's one of those "telephone poles"!

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