Playing the Long Game in a Short-Term World: Consequences and Strategies for Racial Justice Work

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Representatives of a volunteer organization want to understand and address the underlying causes for their lack of diversity. They have made modest progress toward diversity in race and class, and some chapters have successfully become more representative. But overall, despite action plans and good intentions, they are still overwhelmingly White. Given the demographic shifts in the USA, they fear the current slow loss of membership will accelerate if they do not change. They ask me, in almost plaintive tones, "What should we do first? What is the best way to proceed?"

A self-identified social justice organization asks how to integrate and reflect a racial justice lens in all they do, internally and externally. At the initial meeting with senior managers, they are eager to align action with analysis. "Where should we start?" There is disagreement about whether to start with the personal—awareness and healing—or the organizational—culture and strategy.

The key challenge in working toward racial and other diversity is mindset. Clients value action and expect a well-delineated set of steps they can follow to reach the desired diversity destination quickly and smoothly.

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They want content expertise and a technical solution to an adaptive problem (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). In this chapter, after locating my own cultural orientation to diversity work, I describe approaches—systemic, being, process, and development—that challenge the short-term mindset characterized by the opposite orientations of linear, action, expert, and performance and, yet, paradoxically, provide demonstrable results. I conclude with dilemmas created by such positioning.

Cultural Shaping and Implications

I am fundamentally an immigrant. I came to the USA at seven years old from England, where I was born to Jamaican parents, to join family that was growing roots in New York in a larger Jamaican immigrant community at the time of the Civil Rights movement as it morphed into anti-war and anti-poverty movements. The larger dynamic and identity of the immigrant experience informs my work and life—deciphering this new place while tied, through family and community, to places of story but little direct experience. While inspired by movements for justice and inclusion, and drawn to the American promise, as an outsider, I experienced exclusion, ridicule, and even violence. I resolved to understand and address the cultural dissonance I encountered. My work now supports social justice organizations as they strive to embody and align their actions with their aspirations.

In that work, I have learned that means are ends. The way of doing is already the outcome. Results exist in the actions that create them. Justice requires acting justly. Love is cultivated by loving. Much of what individuals, organizations, and communities struggle with is the misalignment between their goals and the behaviors they use to achieve them.

From this realization flow several implications for consulting. First, it is best to be conscious of one's *true* intentions because the long term and short term are intimately and inextricably connected. Such intentions are beyond goal-setting. I help individuals, groups, and organizations attend to their values, deeper aspirations, and the ultimate visions that reflect those values. One group met to articulate their aspirations, yet initially they focused on what they thought they could achieve given significant opposition. They struggled to identify the ultimate vision that would bring their values into action. However, one year later, they reported the importance of establishing a shared vision, of being *for* something. They went from reacting to crises to building the community

they wanted to create, while creatively and effectively addressing the challenges they faced.

Second, focus on both the micro and the macro. If means are ends, then history, organizational or individual change are created in infinitesimally small actions, as well as the larger moments that are captured in official records. All past actions lead to the present state as parts of a system interact and adapt to each other. A linear approach assumes direct causality and can affect the system. But with an understanding of multiple interactions and variations, the linear approach is less comprehensive. When the terrain it assumes shifts and unacknowledged factors impact change, the linear approach externalizes responsibility for outcomes. A broader view of interplay among minute and large actions creates increased accountability and greater possibility for success. The client that wanted a clear roadmap ended up developing a process that accounted for multiple players and opportunities for input, feedback, and adjustment. After they spent time examining their own system and the many ways racial justice could be affected and reflected, they went from easy frustration with others to excited, if sober, accountability for themselves in interaction with their stakeholders.

Third, align actions with intentions. There is no distinction between action and being. If the micro constitutes the macro, then individuals and larger systems can investigate and hold themselves accountable to the enactment of their intentions in even, and especially the smallest ways. From Gandhi comes the guidance to be the change, to *demonstrate* desired changes, to bring the future into being now. It is an argument against expedience. Similarly, Schein (1992) establishes that leaders create organizational culture through role modeling and the observed criteria used for key decisions. In all cases, action is not separate from being but an expression of it. The Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century used simple yet powerful actions—sitting at lunch counters, registering to vote—whose potency came from aligning action and aspiration. After a client facing internal challenges of inclusion has identified its aspirations, we then discuss what actions will demonstrate the vision come to life. As one client said, "demonstrate, not pontificate." As the task force planned, they attended to details that would have gone unnoticed before—how to structure meetings, ways to express openness to new ideas, how to show respect for each other. The next, crucial, step was to support group members in taking those actions with each other, right now. They reported greater optimism, capacity, and willingness to persist.

Fourth, a long-term perspective that takes means as ends necessarily prizes process. How fitting then that my life and work align in my role as an organization development [OD] consultant.

HOLISM AND SYSTEMS THINKING

Such a background leads me to appreciate holism and systems thinking in diversity work. Rather than see parts of a finite whole, diversity work asserts each part as a whole and the whole as a constellation of parts in dynamic relationship with one another. Change may be accomplished by changing *any* factor, singly or in concert with others, because such change disturbs the equilibrium of the system and requires it to adjust to a new state. It is true that the system will seek to maintain its current state by attempting to "reclaim" or "expel" the changed element(s), for example, the person who is encouraged to assimilate or is fired for being a poor fit. For a new equilibrium to be reached, the changing factors—people, dynamics, and practices—must stay changed long enough to require the system to adjust to them.

In systems, the parts create the whole and the whole is in the parts. Just as genetic testing can use any cell to reveal the truth of the whole person's biological composition and history, each person is a carrier of the larger culture as well as a participant in it.

A holistic diversity perspective demands people to see the system and their role in sustaining it. Moreover, it requires that the system be understood in an even larger context of time and space, that is, history and location. For example, it calls on people in the dominant group, to see themselves with a group identity of dominant, with the historical and cultural accumulation of privations and privileges that accrue to that status. With this awareness, it is less likely that members of dominant groups will see themselves as individuals only, free to act as though they exist without regard to history and location. Similarly, a systems view encourages people in subordinated groups to see how they collude with the system even as they want to change it.

If everything is connected to and reflective of everything else, then the place to start is where there is interest and energy that can be sustained. The Diversity Diamond © (Berthoud & Greene, 2001) displays these ideas graphically (Fig. 10.1). In this conception, diversity, equity, and inclusion work necessarily require attention to multiple facets of self-awareness, interaction, organizational culture, and external relations.