Inclusion: A Journey in Progress

Civil Rights and Affirmative Action

The Civil Rights Act of 1967 began a multi-stage process to make America a society in which overt discrimination on the basis of individual differences was illegal in employment matters. In the nearly four decades since organizations began responding formally to candidate and employee diversity, Affirmative Action, multiculturalism and diversity management succeeded each other as better and more comprehensive approaches to managing an increasingly diverse workforce.

Affirmative Action legislation in the mid-1960s aimed at making workplaces more equitable and representative of the gender and ethnic diversity within the community.

Organizations began to consider how their efforts resulted in equitable treatment for people who had not historically benefited from informal sources of power. While Affirmative Action was never wholly about quotas, it has been misrepresented as a program aimed only at hiring individuals on the basis of race and gender, instead of its real goal of having a workforce mirror the talent available in the marketplace. This misperception around Affirmative Action caused individuals who benefited from its impact to become targets of hostility, while unconsciously reminding majority employees that every gain for “them” was a loss for “us.” Affirmative Action then became a “we” v. “them,” highly oppositional approach to workforce differences.

At the same time, issues of race and gender were becoming increasingly prominent in society. The Equal Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement brought attention to two primary aspects of diversity — gender and race — and how those aspects of identity still served to limit individuals in their efforts to succeed. Such movements were critical to the empowerment of women, people of color, and immigrants — groups that had historically been penalized in this country as not fitting within the mainstream paradigm of assimilation. While particular constituencies did, in fact, benefit, such efforts also served to separate Americans psychologically and draw attention to group characteristics such as race and gender.

Multiculturalism

In the 1980s, multiculturalism aimed at celebrating group differences such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and was a beneficiary of the 1980’s progressive legal and social movements. No longer aimed simply at legislative reform, multiculturalism claimed that our differences must be recognized and utilized. In the workplace multiculturalism became “valuing diversity.” Organizations were challenged to create more open and inclusive cultures where differences were admitted, understood and embraced.

Women and people of color, referred to as “minorities,” received well-deserved and long overdue recognition, but white men were sometimes framed as members of a privileged caste, the villains behind organizational/social phenomena that appeared exclusive. This led to a backlash against “political correctness” and activities focusing attention on differences.

Managing Diversity

Diversity philosophy continued to evolve throughout the 1990s. The widely read writings of Roosevelt Thomas emphasized the business rationale for managing diversity as a strategic resource, leading to higher levels of creativity through diverse teams’ input into decisions or penetration of ethnic markets. During the mid 1990’s the FutureWork Institute put diversity management into a whole systems change context. It moved its clients away from disconnected interventions in the service of diversity such as non-curriculum-based diversity awareness training and multicultural events, and it prodded them into a full scale, multi-year change management process that moved from strategy to implementation through specific steps.

Throughout the three stages outlined so far: Affirmative Action, Valuing Differences and Managing Diversity, an extraordinary number of useful concepts have come to the fore, and each subsequent stage built upon and used ideas from its predecessors. Most large companies with diversity initiatives focus now on all three stages.
In 2001 and 2002 a new focus: “inclusion,” was discussed among many diversity practitioners and managers. As of now, writers have a number of meanings for the term. We will outline these various meanings in the next section and discuss their pro’s and con’s. The final section of this report will present The FutureWork Institute’s understanding of “inclusion” in the context of the future of work and the workplace.

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The shift we see in companies to greater focus on “inclusion” appears to be a reaction to many events:

- The 2000 U.S. Census shows as a nation we are more diverse than ever. Increasing birth rates among minority groups, immigration, intermarriage, and decreasing birth rates among whites are important factors. In addition, the census’ race/ethnic group categories were expanded and for the first time, respondents could check more than one category. The result: Americans identified themselves in 126 combined categories of racial/ethnic groups — an astounding difference from the traditional five racial/ethnic group categories in the 1990 Census.

  With so many ways to identify one’s race/ethnicity, and with increasing numbers of Americans — particularly those under 40 — identifying themselves in more than one category, differences become less clear cut. Difference is simply a way of being — we are all different. If anything, the multiplicity of differences is a unifying force for Americans.

- While perhaps it is premature to assert, the events of September 11th and its aftermath may have also served to nudge Americans to a more unified front. Never before were so many Americans — of different races, ethnicities, classes— heard talking about the connection that we, as Americans, have to one another. It seems that Americans moved a few steps forward on a continuum they were walking along already — toward greater unity and inclusion.

Diversity in every practitioner’s definition includes all people, but there is a widespread suspicion on the part of managers and employees that what companies are calling “managing diversity” is simply Affirmative Action in a new guise. Often this confusion is traced directly back to diversity professionals and their communications.

A genuine desire to include white men as a necessary component in the diversity continuum is on many professionals’ minds. Much of the less thoughtful diversity rhetoric in the past had an edge of blame, perhaps referring to the “white male power structure” or some other apparent conspiracy to keep others in their place. Reputable professionals reject this rhetoric and realize that, unless white men, the single largest group in the present U.S. workforce, are included in diversity initiatives, they will fail.

There is a growing realization that there are other, less visible aspects of diversity that affect many employees and the companies they work for. Family cultural background, sexual orientation, education level, work styles, religion, disabilities and a host of other factors influence how people are perceived and rated, and how great a contribution to the company they will be permitted to make. All these are diversity issues.

Some other factors that affect the more widespread use of the term inclusion are a combination of:

- Misunderstanding the role of diversity in companies; seeing it as a variant on social engineering
- Antagonism toward its perceived reverse bias (“winners” and “losers”)
- Simple psychic fatigue with the term “diversity” that seems to demand such difficult personal and organizational changes.

As practitioners on client sites, we have heard for ourselves references to the “d—word” and the “diversity police,” and the groans and rolled eyes that greet the announcement of another diversity initiative. Misunderstanding, antagonism and fatigue are genuinely out there.
Four Meanings of Inclusion

Recently a team of FutureWork practitioners and researchers began a virtual think tank on the concept of inclusion. Although this increasingly popular term is still a work in progress, the initial findings from the team show four very different meanings to the term “inclusion.”

Meaning #1: Managing Diversity under a New Name

Sensing that a fatigue point has been reached with the term “diversity,” some people seem to be re-packaging standard diversity concepts, programs and other initiatives under the term “inclusion.” This meaning adds little new to the dialogue but serves the useful purpose of re-energizing diversity messages under a broader term.

“Inclusion,” by definition, means “everybody” in meaning #1, and the term serves as a broad umbrella concept in which everyone might see him- or herself. It has the added connotation of something like “one, big, happy family” at work, in which the overworked parent or the sulking child is cared for and brought more closely into the heart of the family. It is hard to get angry at “inclusiveness.”

At base there is nothing wrong with re-packaging diversity, even with a “feel-good” label. The problem with meaning #1 is that it can represent, in some companies, a complete surrender of the almost 40 years effort of making the workplace a fair and equitable place where all people can contribute to business success. In place of the hard work and thought that went into diversity, inclusion in this sense can water down the concept and apply it only to satisfying staff relationships.

Meaning #2: Social Cohesion at Work: The European Model

Inclusion as a term for diversity-oriented activities arose in Europe during the last decade, and emerged from the dialogue about the status of immigrants throughout the continent. Migration from former colonies, and lately from eastern Europe, was encouraged-up to a point-to provide workers for the post-War expansion. However, even second and third generations of these guest workers often live separately, maintain their own language as a second language and their own religious identities, and are discriminated against in employment.

Since European countries can point to clear national identities with long histories, assimilating the foreign born and their children into those national identities is a key issue if the countries are to maintain their identities. Hence terms such as “social cohesion” and “inclusive behavior” at work have become the subject of wide-ranging dialogue.

Although comparisons across continents and cultures are tricky, we can generally say that the European notion of inclusion is more like the American “assimilation model,” in which minorities adapt to the dominant male majority company cultures.

The European meaning of the term: “Inclusion” has rightly been rejected by diversity practitioners in the United States. As a nation of immigrants we have many cultures whose blend is the “American culture.” Our multicultural stage showed us that.

Meaning #3: An Extension Of Diversity into Its Secondary Aspects

In the effort to note and value the many differences people in the workforce bring to work, there is a strong effort by many diversity practitioners to include the secondary and less visible differences that make people unique. Race, membership in an ethnic group and gender can be thought of as primary, visible aspects of diversity, but people possess many other traits and experiences that make them different. Some of these differences can be quite profound and many company cultures implicitly value one aspect of these differences, and might reject people who demonstrate another aspect.

In an effort to be more embracing, some companies are focusing their attention on the secondary aspects of diversity to ensure that all employees, customer and vendors are included in their initiatives.

This third meaning of the term: “inclusion” is a natural extension of the principal diversity concepts to all aspects of human uniqueness. By design it permits all to participate in diversity initiatives and is more realistic—people are more than their group identity. It is especially important for white men since, apart from resembling their corporate leadership, there are profound and acknowledged differences among white men. For example, few make it to the top where the criteria for success often hinge on work and personal styles.
Companies that have changed their emphasis from diversity to inclusion usually define inclusion in this third way. Effective companies have Affirmative Action plans that are managed quite separately from diversity or inclusion initiatives. They feel that race and gender issues are being handled. Their concern is to bring diversity to its next step—building an inclusive environment in which all people are valued for their contribution to the business.

What does this understanding of inclusion mean for day-to-day work? It means that the dialogue around diversity has transcended its original framework. Originally framed as righting the wrongs of those in power, or making the “losers” win and — perhaps—the “winners” lose, inclusion is about abundance and room for all. No longer considered a zero-sum game, an inclusive work setting allows for difference but also fosters a greater, and more authentic, sense of unity.

Individuals can choose to focus on their differences or can choose not to; it is their choice, and either way, they are valued. They are valued most fundamentally for the contributions they make but they are recognized for the ways in which they differ from their colleagues, bringing something to their work processes that is unique.

What is unique, too, about this definition of inclusion is that no group is excluded from its net. While multiculturalism and managing diversity may have purported to be inclusive, in reality they often served to exclude white men, making many feel penalized for the actions of some amorphous construct that they seemed to represent. Inclusion in this sense is about recognizing that while an organization must reflect the community at large, a continual and delicate balancing act must take place to effect such change to ward against perceptions of favoritism and “reverse discrimination.”

Ultimately, this type of inclusion is about breaking down the barriers of difference in an organization to encourage cooperation and collaboration, so that talent of all kinds is attracted, and organizations become more innovative.

On the negative side, there are some issues that the FutureWork Institute feels are important to note, despite the rich possibilities of the third meaning of inclusion:

- There is still unfinished business to be done in America; racism and sexism have not been eliminated in the American workplace

- We must never be too quick to find the “answer” to our human tendency to exclusionary behavior. A true culture change process takes time and effort

- Inclusion often deals only with relationships and ignores the business rationale

- Human beings are hard-wired to both clan behavior and utopianism; we cling to those who are like us and we dream of a better society. It is in addressing tension between these two tendencies that we grow. It would be a shame if inclusion, in this meaning, blurred that tension and lulled us into believing we have accomplished what we are still working toward.

**Meaning #4: Inclusion as a new way to work**

Imagine a business organization that had no pretensions at being a family, or a team, or an isolated club of self-congratulatory people who believe that membership in their group confers rights and privileges. Imagine a business organization that is just a business organization run by real people who value their own humanness as much as their financial success.

Because they are not a family or club or team, they have no self-organizing principles for their company that come from other social patterns. In fact, they organize their company purely on the basis of what’s best for the customer, believing that what’s best for the customer will be most profitable for them. They form teams when needed and then let them disperse after they’ve accomplished their work. They have no privileged hierarchy; only roles that people fill best. They first blurred the boundaries inside so that they could be free enough to blur boundaries around the margins—they engage outsiders as productively as they use insiders. This company co-creates its future, and blends with its markets, its suppliers, its customers, its people—having jettisoned superficial ego long ago as a dangerous distraction to success.

This company has achieved some notable but very basic accomplishments. It is no longer afraid of its own people and therefore sees no need to watch them constantly. (Self-management is valued) In fact, it encourages new thinking—sometimes those ideas are worth millions. It scoffs at the notion of proprietary intellectual capital, knowing full well how one creative individual is worth more than a thousand of yesterday’s ideas. It long ago forgot the distinction between employee, contractor, and now-and-then contributor; they all work when needed and just get paid differently.

This company trades on its talent, but it is too smart to believe that talent: intellectual, emotional or social, can be owned. It seeks out and purchases talent wherever it can find it, and creates an almost individualized work environment around that talented person so that he or she can
produce world class results. “Need to work at home?” Fine. “Need to be around other creative people at the office?” Fine. “Want to take the summer’s off?” Sure, just adjust your work schedule so things are smooth for you and everyone else. “Want to stay with us a couple of years and then move somewhere else?” OK. Just produce like mad while you’re here.

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Mistakes occur at this company, just as they do everywhere else. But here mistakes are mostly seen as opportunities and self-corrected; a few are other-corrected. But talent is always respected.

We have just described a profitable company that has co-created a culture of inclusion by dismantling inconsequential but highly frustrating barriers. The standard workweek is a construct, as is full time employment. Customers have as much right to know as employees do and their inquiries are welcome. The “we” v. “they” that is the very opposite of inclusion is gone. This company does not have an inclusion initiative, it has co-created an inclusive culture.

This fourth meaning of inclusion is still only a vision, but it is a vision of full inclusion for the sake of business success.

Definition of Inclusion

Inclusion is the set of organizational norms and values that promote the development of an institutional culture in which diversity is valued and promoted and individuals feel empowered within an atmosphere of trust, safety, and respect.

An inclusive work place is one that: accepts, values and utilizes individual and inter-group differences within its workforce. A warm and welcoming atmosphere eases the process of “learning the ropes” for the new member and aids in making the member comfortable in the new group environment.

When a company culture emphasizes inclusion, there is...

- Access to decisions and the reasons why they were made
- Wide distribution of power
- Free flow of information
- Free exchange of criticism
- Flexibility to cope with immediate changes in the business environment
- Autonomy
- Welcome and acceptance of new employees—no need to “prove oneself”

When the culture does not emphasize inclusiveness, there will be...

- Barriers to the inner circle
- Win-lost competition between individuals and departments
- Isolation and fragmentation of sub-groups
- Power concentrated and hoarded
- Consistent and clear policies and procedures
- Overdependence on managers
- Active resistance to diversity and to anyone who appears in the least different
- Formality and caution that interferes with creativity
- Limited acknowledgement and recognition
- Favorites
- Resistance to others’ ideas and opinions
**Thoughts on Moving Forward**

Programs to present inclusion as the next stage in a diversity initiative should probably begin with the third definition of inclusion: the extension of diversity into its secondary characteristics, and build toward a culture of inclusiveness (the fourth definition: inclusion as a new way to work).

The operative goal of this program is an increase in Cultural Competency, defined as:

The ability and willingness to interact respectfully and effectively with all individuals and groups, acknowledging the common and different elements of people’s identities. It is a process that promotes development of skills, beliefs, attitudes, habits, behaviors and policies that enable all members of the organization to interact appropriately and offer encouragement and support to all so they can do their best work.

The key learnings of such a program would be an increase in Cultural Competency through greater awareness of and practice in:

- **Talent recognition.** The importance of intellectual, emotional and social talent to the successful running of the business. *Key learning: how to recognize the three kinds of talent and their importance to business success.*

- **Seeing my own barriers.** A self-assessment that focuses on my personal expectations of self and others (from my own history), the organization’s expectations of me and others and how it affects me, and others’ expectations of themselves that appear to differ from mine. *Key learning: what are the barriers I put in my own and others’ way to prevent their full contribution.*

- **Learning inclusive excellence.** A clear understanding of what inclusive behaviors look like in real life, and how champions of inclusiveness are readily distinguished from those who are passive observers or active resisters. *Key learning: By looking at selected work-related “moments of truth” where one has the opportunity to practice inclusive behavior or not, I will understand what champion behaviors look like.*

- **Planning for a more inclusive environment.** Small group planning sessions in which participants develop goals and strategies, while respecting the organization as it now exists, for moving the company to a more inclusive environment. *Key learning: develop a common vision of what the company can be like in the future and empower oneself to help it achieve that vision.*