

Negotiating the Path: Towards Diversity and Inclusion

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*Editor's Note: This is the first installment of a new feature we are calling **Negotiating the Path**, coordinated by Letita Mason. Ideas for future columns, contributions and reactions may be sent to her at masonl@ncssm.edu. She will also moderate the Diversity and Inclusion Forum at NCSSSMST.org > [Connecting Consortium Professionals](#) > [Forums](#).*

Anyone who has not felt the cosmic shift in human consciousness demonstrated by world-wide events within the past nine months would have to be living under a rock. The first African-American President of the United States is sworn into office nearly forty years after the historic *I Have a Dream Speech* at the March on Washington. Bollywood takes Hollywood by storm, sweeping the Academy Awards with a cinematic favorite from India entitled *Slumdog Millionaire*. China opens its doors to the world as it hosts the 2008 Summer Olympics in grandiose style. The world faces economic crises that rival no others seen in modern history.

Our collective paradigm also has shifted, providing us with awareness that our commonalities far exceed our differences. Our global survival then hinges on an appreciation that the solutions to our problems reside within the collective strength of our diversity. However, achieving inclusion is often relegated to periodic infusions of multiculturalism into the mainstream of our organizational culture. And *diversity* is quickly becoming the latest buzzword for an idea that, though politically correct, causes us to dread the discomfort associated with real discourse on the issue.

In a 1997 article entitled *Challenges of Leading a Diverse Workforce*, the authors point out that "internally, old constituencies with large blocks of power, such as boards of directors and senior management, may be uncomfortable with admitting dissimilar outsiders who are likely to challenge the old guard's perceived power, either

explicitly or implicitly." Their research suggests that there are six areas of challenge that leaders must address in order to promote institutional diversity. These areas are:

- **Changed Power Dynamics.** With the infusion of new, diverse individuals who may not fit the traditional organizational mold, traditional constituents may feel an erosion of power.
- **Diversity of Opinions.** As the face of an organization changes, the number and range of perspectives increase exponentially and leaders must synthesize a diversity of opinions from individuals' unique values, cultural grounding, and the resulting accepted behaviors. The challenge for the leader will be to identify and recognize, at least implicitly, the different frames of reference that are represented and to extract common denominators that may serve as a foundation for issue resolution.
- **Perceived Lack of Empathy.** The ability to establish an emotional identification with followers from a variety of cultures is an attribute that distinguishes leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Mahatma Gandhi, who recognized the needs of their followers and incorporated those needs into their convictions.
- **Tokenism, Real and Perceived.** While real tokenism can be avoided by not using quota

systems, perceived tokenism presents a different situation. Where tokenism is perceived, there is a tendency to attribute failures to the individual's gender or ethnic criteria. Leaders are in a unique position to effect changes in attitudes and perceptions toward diverse individuals by actively promoting, defending, or expressing their interests.

- **Participation.** In a diverse workforce, employee participation in critical organizational processes is necessary to enable the organization to capitalize on new, different, and creative ways of thinking. Ensuring everyone has a voice is a critical first step toward a full appreciation of diverse organizational members.
- **Overcoming Inertia.** Inertia will be especially problematic for leaders in organizations in the tolerant stage, because an inordinate amount of time will be spent on the previous five challenges. To tackle the challenge of inertia, a leader must change his or her mindset and have a very strong and clearly communicated organizational vision and goals.

The authors reason that organizations can exist at points along the continuum that reflect relative stages of intolerance, tolerance and appreciation of diversity among organizational members (Joplin et. al., 1997).

NCSSMST member institutions have had a transformative impact on designing innovative curriculum, research and teaching models in STEM fields, as well as in the fine arts and the humanities. But what will be our legacy? How can we resist the status quo of an exclusive monocultural psychological and contextual framework that devalues differences as deficiencies? "Disruption is difficult because the definitions and trajectories of improvement change. What were valuable improvements of the product that had been unimportant become highly valued" (Christensen, 2008).

Starting nearly three decades ago, our institutions were the disruptive innovation that challenged the status quo by providing public educational opportunities focused on science and mathematics that rivaled expensive private institutional offerings throughout our country. Yet the definitions and trajectories have changed. The U.S. is suffering from a decreased interest in STEM fields. History is able to help identify one culprit of the "educational malaise" our country is negotiating today.

"As Japan reached prosperity, an interesting thing happened, however. The percentage of students who graduated with science and engineering degrees declined. Why did this happen? The answer has little to do with schools themselves, which did not change significantly. Prosperity was the culprit. When Japan was emerging from the ashes of World War II, there was clear extrinsic motivation that encouraged students to study subjects like science and engineering that would help lift them out of poverty and reward them with a generous wage" (Christensen, 2008).

Is it possible that educating groups traditionally excluded from the prosperity equation may hold the answer to renewing the numbers of scientists, mathematicians, researchers, doctors, and engineers in the United States? Could it be that these populations, though initially considered unimportant, will actually become highly valued in increasing our competitiveness globally? It is my hope that those of us in NCSSMST will continue to demonstrate transformative leadership in meeting the challenges that rob our institutions of the positive benefits greater inclusion and true multiculturalism afford us.

References

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