

Diversity and Inclusion: Important and Difficult

Comments made to open the IWK Diversity and Inclusion Community Forum

September 28, 2010

On the Occasion of the IWK Diversity and Inclusion Community Forum, I was asked to give some introductory remarks on the nature and importance of efforts of inclusion. These are the notes that I used as the basis of my comments:

I would like to thank the organizers of this Community Forum for inviting me to speak. Many who know me would understand that the concepts of diversity and inclusion are near and dear to my heart and to my practice. Given the limited time frame that I have today, I wanted to focus my comments on asking and answering three major questions today: Why is diversity and inclusion important; Why is it so hard; and What is it we need to do?

Why is this so important?

It is essential if we are to undertake the work of diversity and inclusion that we recognize our dark past related to the treatment of peoples in our society. This is not simply a "nice" work. It is essential to undo the history of exclusion that has been fundamental to the way our society works. Our work then, must consider:

- The global colonizing exploits of Europeans;
- The attempted genocide that was perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples in the Americas;
- The enslavement and transport of Africans to North America;
- The marginalization and exploitation of almost every immigrant group that has come to North America since the earliest European colonizing efforts;
- The criminalization of women and sexual minority people;
- And the institutionalizing of class privilege.

This is our history, and as shameful as it is, it would be unthinkable to undertake work and discussion in the field of diversity and inclusion without understanding it, because almost every institution in North America today was founded in this historical context, and hence has racism and exclusion woven throughout its existence. To not acknowledge this disempowers the work of inclusion.

The second question is Why Diversity and Inclusion work is so hard. I suggest that there are 2 principle reasons: First, as suggested, we have inherited systems and structures that were built in a dark time. Some of these structures are visible to us . . . Some are invisible. I have often been heard reflecting on the fact that our current public education system was founded at a time when only the children of the privileged class were expected to be taught and accommodated at school. The expectation of schools was then that every child came from a home where books were present, where parents were literate, where ambitions that aligned well with the presented curriculum guaranteed interest and relevance; and where children were guaranteed to be coming from homes in which children were acculturated to be sedate, compliant, respectful and have the capacity to sit attentively for extended periods of time. By way of cultural shorthand I often say that the education system was built for the children of the owners of the Hudson's Bay Company, and certainly not for the children of the Aboriginals of this country or for the enslaved and indentured servants.

The second reason this work is so hard is that people are culturally different. One of the first principles of working with people understands that the more similar we are, the easier it is to work together. By contrast, the less similar we are the more difficult. I will not explore this

further here, but it is well documented in the work of Sue and Sue and their classic text "Counselling the Culturally Different".

What then, is it that we must do?

Well, in response to the system issues we need to examine the institutions in which we work and reform them. We need policies to support diversity in employment and to ensure that racist and discriminatory practices are structurally removed and vigorously confronted.

With respect to our cultural differences we need to cultivate a working community of culturally competent citizens who are not just tolerant and informed about the nature of our differences, but actually value that diversity and know how to leverage it to create a more functional and inclusive community. We do this by attending to the structural issues mentioned above and by creating opportunities for us to work and play together in culturally diverse groupings. And in those spaces we need to activate what is for some a way of interacting that is different than their natural tendencies:

1. We need to make space and take space. Resisting the tendency to only speak out within our cultural comfort zones, we need to actively make our voices known in less comfortable settings. Conversely we also, when in those groups need to give space to the voices that are often more silent.
2. We need to develop, implement, monitor and improve programmes and places that are those spaces for diverse work and play.
3. We need to be constantly asking ourselves the questions Whose voice did we not hear today, and how do we get that voice to be part of this conversation;
4. And finally we need to believe that the work is never done.

Robert S. Wright