An Introspection on Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

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Abstract

Addressing issues of racism, ethnicity, and national origin is not a process that begins on a certain date as implementation of a new initiative, and then ends a few weeks or a few months later with a check mark indicating, "We did that." Rather, it is more likely to evolve from the work, or new self-awareness of a concerned individual, or leader, or perhaps small groups that care enough to change, and who desire to make the lives of those they serve, teach, or work with, as well as those in their communities, more equitable versus equal. In their book, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006) state, "Through our fieldwork and research, we have defined three critical factors necessary for school systems to close the racial achievement gap: passion, practice, and persistence" (p.333). With these qualities, individuals and groups find ways to overcome resistance to change and other obstacles, take action to implement change, and invest the time and effort needed to see change through.

Critical to the work of addressing issues of racism, ethnicity, and national origin is the personal and introspective journey the individual as a contributor, leader or concerned community member must take towards cultural proficiency. This involves a willingness to question our assumptions about these issues, to look critically at our reactions to others, who are different from us, our ability to be honest about where we are on the Cultural Proficiency Continuum, and our readiness to reach out and learn about other cultural groups. To be effective, we must also come to understand the privileges of entitlement, and the systematic oppression of others within our society. "To understand both oppression and entitlement is the first step to self-determination and personal responsibility" (Lindsey, Roberts, &CampbellJones, 2013, p. 45).

One might start by asking, "What are the issues of racism, ethnicity and national origin?" Some of the answers we point to are the achievement gaps within our schools, the inequities in pay for women within the workplace, our propensity to dehumanize undocumented immigrants, or the disallowance of the celebrations or inclusion of traditions practiced by those from another country within our institutions. While these are certainly issues to address, resolving specific difficulties does not get to the root of the problem, or result in the systemic change that comes about when an organization shifts its culture to a model that is inclusive and equitable. We can pass new laws, create new initiatives, change our policies and our procedures, but if representatives of the dominant culture do not make a fundamental shift in how people from other cultural groups are viewed and treated, there is no real change. According to the author of this article, racism, ethnicity and national origin are the issues, and they stand alone as the predominant root cause of a society that fails to provide a safe and promising future for all its members. Concerns specific to educational achievement gaps, gender related issues, and immigration reform, to name just a few, are the symptoms of a society that has not clearly addressed issues of racism, ethnicity, and national origin.

Looking inward to organizations we work at, belong to, or lead, we may become aware of specific issues related to race, ethnicity or national origin that are problematic and that require further inquiry. Taking a systematic approach to the inquiry will help inform and guide the organization in a direction of change, and will provide a structure to manage the change for the best possible outcomes. A systematic approach includes analyzing disaggregated data, completing an environmental scan or self-assessment to determine the culture, values and direction the organization is going, and developing a team that includes members in key positions with the ability to lead and the authority to make decisions. Discussions that not only address the specific issue or difficulty the organization is facing, should also include the larger societal issues of racism, ethnicity, and national origin. The team is then in a position to participate in a visioning process of what the organization would ideally look like in the future. It is in this visioning process where a shift in an organization's culture begins.

We recognize the need to reflect, to learn, to be introspective, and to change as we move towards cultural proficiency, but this personal journey happens in tandem with the work we do to address the problems that keep our society from serving all its members. We can start this work, and even lead the effort while we move towards cultural awareness, but to do so, we should partner with those within our organizations, or if needed outside the organization, that are experienced in doing this work, and may even have achieved cultural proficiency themselves. We must seek out these individuals, especially if we are a member of the dominant culture that may have benefited from living in a privileged society. We do not know, what we do not know, and it takes time to develop understanding (Lindsey, et al., 2013).

A Self-Reflective Journey

In order to truly help others and ourselves to become culturally proficient, we must be receptive to the ideas behind awareness and must also be willing to learn about our own beliefs, values, and behaviors that might thwart the efforts of becoming culturally proficient. For members of the dominant culture in our society, the concepts of entitlement, white privilege and oppression of other cultural groups are often difficult to understand and accept. Nevertheless, to move towards cultural proficiency, one must understand and accept that entitlement and

privilege exist in our society today and that this negatively affects the quality of life for many people from other cultural groups. When presented with information about oppression and entitlement, many people often have pungent reactions and experience feelings of anger or guilt. Moving past the anger and guilt is an important step towards building the confidence needed to actively address issues around race, ethnicity, and national origin, as this allows the dominant cultural group to begin to reach out and learn about other groups, and to also take positive action to end oppressive practices. Likewise, those of other cultural groups are also in a better position to initiate change and form the relationships that help build understanding, and allow for a transformation within organizations. Organizational leaders in particular must strive to find the acceptance and understanding to reach the middle ground of confidence, as it is a confident and transformational leader that initiates change, and has the ability to move the organization towards a more equitable environment (McCaffery, 2010).

Recognizing how oppression is manifested in our organizations today is important in helping leaders identify areas that must be addressed so that all people in our society have the opportunity to lead better lives. For example, in our schools, acts of oppression become apparent when we look at disparate rates of expulsion or discipline, persistent achievement gaps, and limited or impeded mobility for members of other cultural groups. Other areas of concern include ethnocentric textbooks, lowered expectations, and biased testing (Lindsey et al., 2013).

For historically oppressed groups, it is often difficult to overcome feelings of anger and resentment toward the dominant group when it is felt that they are naïve or unwilling to acknowledge the existence of continued oppression and/or privilege (Lindsey, et al., 2013). To effectively address issues of racism, ethnicity and national origin, it is necessary to gain self-determination. Personal power is lost when self-determination is not achieved, and people within the non-dominant cultural groups find themselves feeling defeated with no possibility of improvement or change (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999).

Instituting Leadership Teams

To address issues of racism, ethnicity, and national origin, we must build a strong team of dedicated people and then engage them in leading initiatives and implementing change. The team will be responsible for the work of inclusiveness to be spread out, provides a structure in which to address initiatives, and provides critical feedback for all stakeholders. To focus on issues around equity and to address the needs of diverse cultures, the team leader will foster culturally proficient behavior by following and practicing the "The Guiding Principles of Culturally Proficient Leadership" (Lindsey, et al., 2013). It is incumbent on the leader to help the institution develop a culture that is open to reviewing and adjusting its vision over time. The process of reviewing the vision allows participants to dream, and should be inclusive of everyone within the institution. In addressing issues of racism, ethnicity and national origin, participants in a visioning process might imagine an institution that successfully educates all its students, free from oppressive practices, and inclusive of all cultural groups. The vision informs the mission of the institution. This is also a time to identify and state institutional values. *In the Higher Education Manager's Handbook,* Peter McCaffery states, as we have seen, is at the heart of leadership. A vision is a 'dream', not a pipe-dream but a realistic long-term ambition: a picture of the future that you want to produce (2010, p. 2010,). Once this work is done, the concept of

change is more easily embraced, and the leader is in a position to manage change. This includes understanding that some are more agreeable to change than others. Rather than leave team members and others behind, thus marginalizing them, a skilled leader engages in dialogue and openness, and works to obtain buy-in from all
parties throughout the process. This creates a stronger sense of community, builds relationships, and establishes institutional trust shared by stakeholders.

      The formation of effective relationships built on trust is critical to a leader's success. Individual team members also benefit by understanding, evaluating, and assessing where they are in terms of demonstrating culturally proficient behavior.

Implementing Action

      As leaders in higher education, once the groundwork of cultural proficient behavior is laid, we have a moral obligation to take definitive action that leads to systemic change. This action must positively impact our institutions, and those we serve and work with, by eliminating oppressive practices that prevent our students and others in our society from reaching their full potential as human beings. To do less may be seen as disingenuous, or even an unwillingness to address the human condition of our society. The action is not just in providing the framework and the structure; although, admittedly a considerable amount of effort, time, energy, and work goes into this. Action includes the implementation of processes, procedures, and policy changes that address those barriers related to racism, ethnicity, and national origin (Brown-Glaude, 2009).

      To be transformative for those we serve and work with, it is the change in policies, practices, and processes that matter; for we can talk, study and learn for years without actually altering how we do business. We are judged by what we do, not by what we say we want to do. For example, if the data shows that students of some racial or ethnic groups do poorly on assessment or placement exams, and through dialogue and inquiry it is determined that the poor results are related to cultural ideologies, the school leadership must take action that decisively addresses the inequity. The action taken could range from providing a refresher course, reframing the purpose of the exam, and using alternative placement methods. To enact meaningful change, leaders must take bold steps, and act courageously. Polite conversation and playing it safe may speak to impotence and a lack of progress towards cultural proficiency (Lindsey et al., 2013).

      Other tasks that become the responsibilities of a leader are to guide the efforts to manage change and initiate transformative action, which includes implementing strategies structures that compel consistent evaluation and reevaluation of systems, policies and processes. Inequities, when they are discovered must be challenged and addressed systematically. Continuous review of disaggregated data must also be part of institutional processes. We do not attempt it once and then forget about it. We do it over time to mark improvements, as well as address our failures so we can respond and adjust accordingly. As leaders, we do not have a crystal ball. Sometimes we fail in our efforts. Addressing these failures and taking appropriate action to self-correct helps ensure a sustained dynamic effort that is flexible and responsive to the needs of our students and the community.

Conclusion

Through discourse on issues of racism, ethnicity and national origin, we begin to learn, converse, develop visions, and engage others in our efforts. We continue by assessing and reevaluating where we are culturally, meeting the needs of all stakeholders. We look at disaggregated data, provide a structure for change to take place, identify problem areas, and then act in the best interests of everyone within our influence. We must communicate well, using inquiry and dialogue, and we must be willing to put into place a structure that requires continuous input and assessment of our efforts. It is a journey that never ends, and as leaders we must make a commitment to be inclusive and equitable in all we do.

References

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