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A strategy for social change in diversity practice

Cultural Diversity at Work Online
January, 2002

by Patricia Moore Harbour

Since that horrific defining moment of September 11, grief beyond the limits of expression in any global language has been shared worldwide. Lingering depression and sadness are reminders that what we witnessed, with tragic disbelief, is true. Brought to our knees, we recognized our common humanity.

During that brief vulnerable moment, fear gave way to compassion, anger relented to serving others and a community without barriers of race, culture, ethnicity, class, able-ness, religion, background or perspective. This change, feeling connected to one another at the very core of our beings, did not last.

Just as quickly, triggered by anger, frustration, and uncertainty, we responded in familiar ways, from an old paradigm that is characterized by fear, myth and cries for revenge. At once this nightmare brought both destruction and a glimpse of positive social interaction that moved us closer than I can ever remember to living and working together with respect and dignity.

In both directions there was an affirming shift in the thinking and behavior that was influenced by our inner experience.

How can we sustain the change that connects us — to live and treat each other with dignity and respect?

Sustaining change

Over the last twenty-five years, I have come to believe that understanding how to foster social change is at the core of diversity work and leadership. I think Dan Goleman's research sheds light on what the "how" involves.

His research shows that IQ and technical skills are important to the development of leaders, but he describes them as only "threshold capabilities," or "entry-level requirements." They are necessary but not sufficient qualities for effecting change in an organization.

I believe the most effective interventions for influencing change integrate technical skills with cognitive and social skills. Diversity leadership relies on this kind of intervention to produce sustainable change.

This integration of skills incorporates Goleman's ideas and extends them. An example of such an intervention is "transformative learning," a type of learning that emphasizes personal change rather than solely the acquisition of external facts and information that may be separate from, irrelevant to, or even biased to the experiences of the people involved.

In what we call the Transformative Learning Experience (TLE), leaders and managers explore the relationship between their inner beliefs, assumptions, attitudes and thinking, and their external actions including behavior, decisions, language, treatment of others.

This personal approach to change begins with self-knowledge and includes exploring the origin of experiences that may influence the individual's external actions. Transformative learning is a whole learning process that integrates cognitive, transpersonal, contemplative and dialogic experiences.

The results are more effective application of communication and decision-making skills, as well as collaboration, motivation, persuasion, and compassion applied to diverse relationships and social change leadership.

Six strategic elements for social change make up the transformative learning experience process: Building community, increasing self-knowledge, authentic communication, reflection, dialogue and inquiry, and choice. In the process, people garner their collective wisdom, share personal stories, history and experiences, and learn from the relationship dynamics. Over time, communities of learners working together, move beyond the boundaries of culture, race, beliefs, and maximize learning.

In a safe learning community, people build bridges across the boundaries of separation. Stephen Brookfield, a leader in the field of adult education, reports that once a sense of community is established, people are generally willing to discuss tough issues, including sources of racism, heterosexism and other "isms." They courageously challenge not only their assumptions, beliefs, and mythology, but also fellow members of their cultural group.

A deep level of bonding and trust occurs that nurtures that sense of community and belonging. With a reconciliation of past events, the process for healing and change can begin. Learned experiences from the inside out awaken new possibilities for a different perspective and behavior.

Personal transformation: The elements

A cohesive transformative learning experience occurs when participants

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encounter new ways of perceiving, thinking and speaking about an issue, and choose new directions and or actions.

An important outcome of the TLE is individual choice. The value of this approach is that although participants are engaged with a community of learners, each individual, based on their experience, uses what is pertinent to them and chooses to change or not to change.

Community of teachers and learners

In the transformative learning community, all participants are learners and teachers. Unique to this approach is the role of the facilitator who is fully engaged as a participant-learner rather than distant and detached. In the community, participants and facilitator/learner do their own work to broaden their understanding of the issues through the perspective of the others.

They also learn in "real time" while in relationship with others. Participants learn to listen to their on-going private conversations about "the other" and use this as an opportunity for learning about self. Often what is revealed is that their inner thoughts may be inconsistent with their speaking, way of being and actions.

Self-knowledge

"Who am I?" Participants rediscover themselves and deepen their understanding of who they are in relationship to each other, self, diversity issues, and their purpose. Brookfield describes the benefit of a process in which a personal object is used to share the meaning of a story or experience in one's life that reveals inner perspective about an issue.

This process offers an inroad to one's memory, yet builds trust and intimacy in the community. It also gives the participants access to those ideas, messages, and attitudes they may have toward an issue or a cultural group. Participants spend time in nature, journaling, and reflecting. They gain further understanding of who they are in relationship to an issue from the context and origin of their feelings, attitudes, and worldview.

In approaching each process from the inside out, participants discover or rediscover who they are. They explore and celebrate their traditions, culture, and history through traditional teachings from their family, indigenous culture, and that of others.

Authentic communication

Authentic communication is speaking one's own truth and listening to the extent possible through the "lens" of the other person. Jack Kornfield calls this "listening and speaking from the heart." It is willing to be vulnerable and say what is true for you, and to hear what is true for the other person.

Participants describe the lesson from this experience: They can hold their perspective and the other person's view at the same time, even when it is diametrically opposite, yet continue to respect the person. Consistent with Frances Vaughn's research on transpersonal psychology, this capacity is essential to creating a change, a shift in consciousness.

A shift in consciousness is the critical outcome in the transformative learning experience that leads to sustaining change.

Contemplative reflection

Contemplative reflection includes a variety of experiences that participants use to access deeper awareness of self, including their feelings, emotions, spirit, attitudes and values. Learning activities may include visualization, meditation, creative art, and time in nature, journaling and other contemplative practices from diverse traditions.

The contemplative experience bridges a connection with the person's deeper or higher self in relationship to the theme being explored. An example is identifying a metaphor in nature that opens another dimension for learning about a theme or issue. Participants might journal about this experience or share with another participant.

Inquiry and dialogue

Inquiry and dialogue are vital to the transformative learning process. The approach used in the personal transformation experience is for all participants in the learning community "to live in a question" collectively. In this approach, everyone, without blame, shame or guilt, pursues the question.

The purpose is to learn from and with each other through individual experiences and perspectives on the issue being discussed. Participants are encouraged to be open, to interact, and be vulnerable to their own truth and that of others. The burden of defense or

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guilt or shame is released; the question is for everyone.

Political correctness is set aside for authentic dialogue that addresses the unspoken and the uncomfortable, which too often keeps the "isms" alive, and different cultures separated. Participants work together to reach a level of clarity from which new understandings and new possibilities emerge. Frances Vaughn notes that "sitting in the discomfort" is central to a shift in consciousness and a deeper understanding.

Choice

Choice is central to change. It is the first and critical step to advance any new possibility. The person must want to change, choose to change, and act accordingly. Authentic change in organizations, communities and institutions cannot occur without individual personal change.

Individuals become consciously aware of the language, deep-rooted beliefs, attitudes, behavior, myths, and habits they use that may contribute to perpetuating a particular "ism," such as classism or racism. The person awakens to these and other teachings that are revealed from the individual and collective experience. Alternative choices for new or different behaviors and action emerge.

Such awareness may reveal a belief that limits the person in relating with others from different groups, or from recommending promotions for members of certain groups. Each participant chooses the actions they will take.

Change occurs at the moment of choice. One also can choose to leave things the same, or one can make a commitment to implement new ways of being and take concrete actions. Action initiates change.

The desired outcome of transformative learning is change. When participants alter their perspective and conditioned behavior, change is possible. With the emphasis transformative learning places on both the inner and outer dimensions of one's thinking, speaking and behaving, participants can clarify their beliefs and choose a course of action.

Recognizing one's actual perspective in relationship to their behavior is what connects transformative learning to sustainable change. People learn and retain more when they experience and discover for themselves. It is also important that participants recognize that choice and taking initial action is not the end of their process, but the beginning.

Like 9-11, when triggered at the core, we may revert to what we know — those old habits that keep us separate. Constant awareness plus repeating the new behavior to form new habits is essential to sustain the personal change. Clarity, choice and a clear conscious intention to change one's behavior are what make the difference.

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