

10th Anniversary Edition

WHAT IF



SHORT STORIES TO SPARK
INCLUSION & DIVERSITY DIALOGUE

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Root Cause

Come spring in Michigan, I am busy scheming about the new golf equipment I will purchase for the upcoming golf season. By scheming, I mean formulating plans to convince my wife that a new set of shiny golf clubs glittering with the promise of lower scores are the key to my summer happiness. No matter that I bought new clubs the previous year, and the year before that, and the year before that—each new season requires the purchase of new clubs. The annual purchase of new golf equipment is the centerpiece of my strategy for getting better at golf. It's

been my philosophy since my entrée into golf.

A little background; I didn't pick up golf until my late 20s. Oh yes, I had played a round here and there growing up, but as I crossed the bridge into my 30s, I felt the need to find a sport that I could play well into my later years. Golf seemed to fit the bill. By all appearances golf did not seem to be an activity that required a particularly fit body. Evidence of this comes from relatively good tour professionals with the nicknames of "The Walrus" and "Dumpy"—nicknames derived from the physical build of their bodies. While I still retained the competitiveness cultivated during a sports-filled childhood, the physical attributes necessary to be as competitive as my mind thought I could be had already begun their exodus. My left knee had given its two-week notice years ago, and shortly after, my right shoulder took advantage of an early retirement offer. My body was eager for the more comfortable and less painful movements required to navigate an electric golf cart with a drink in hand.

With my late start in golf, I felt an urgency to improve quickly. Hence my strategy for purchasing new equipment every year. What could go wrong? Golf equipment manufacturers are continually innovating. They assure that each new line of clubs, which so happen to come out every year, will help club owners hit the ball straighter, further, and with pinpoint accuracy. I know I shouldn't put full trust into their claims. They're just out to make a profit. And I don't. I psychologically reduce their claims by 10 percent and never pay retail prices. Okay, sometimes.

In the first year of employing my strategy, I improved relatively quickly. Obviously, the strategy had worked. The following year I purchased more new equipment. Again, I improved. It was in year three that I got more serious about golf, which meant serious golf purchases. No more knockoffs, just name brands. Deep into year three, I had what's called a "+9 handicap index." For you nongolfers out there, lower is better. Having a single digit index is good. Double digits, not so much. My improvement

continued over the years to a +5 index. Zoom to the present, however, and my initial forward progress has stalled. In fact, if I look at my golf handicap index over the last five years, I've gotten worse. My index is now double digits. Notice that I have not provided those digits for you.

Here's what's interesting: in these last five years that my golf game degraded, I was still using my strategy of purchasing new equipment every year, the same strategy that helped me improve quickly in the early stages. Why is my strategy no longer working? Simply put, because equipment is no longer my problem. New equipment did all it could do for me. I venture to say the issue has more to do with not enough quality practice time. With that in mind let me offer this thought . . . *When you address the wrong issue, you rarely arrive at solutions for the real problem.* For engineers reading this, what likely popped into their heads is "root cause analysis." Indeed, I've been addressing the wrong issue for the last five years. I continued the pattern of purchasing new equipment every

year, which had worked early on, but I was not putting in the time for deliberate and purposeful practice. I should have had no expectation of improving, or even staying at the same skill level, if I am not addressing the “root cause” of my downhill slide.

With the idea of “root cause” in mind, let me now offer this hypothesis as it relates to the work of inclusion and diversity . . . *Diversity is not the problem. It's closed-mindedness.* If this is true, then many, with good intentions, have been putting time and resources into the wrong place as they address issues of inclusion and diversity. If the root cause of so-called “diversity problems” is, in large part, closed-mindedness, then we must have a paradigm shift in how we think about issues of inclusion and diversity and how we address such issues. Let's examine this a little closer to better understand why closed- or narrow-mindedness might be the real issue in need of addressing.

Imagine you have a room full of people representing all

kinds of human “diversity,” meaning different races, genders, educational backgrounds, personalities, professions, etc. Now, let's make these people closed-minded. What might you get? Well, that sounds a lot like the United States Congress! Okay, more seriously, **Diversity + Closed-mindedness** is a great recipe if you're cooking up a dish of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and conflict. It does not take much imagination to see how an inability or unwillingness to listen to and work with those who are different than you can lead to these and other negative outcomes.

Now, make a slight change to the equation. Keep the exact same diversity but make the people in the room more open-minded and curious, people who put effort into listening to others who are different with the goal of understanding. Make these people more willing to step out of their comfort zones, ones who enjoy entertaining new ideas and are better able to “agree to disagree.” With that change you fundamentally change the potential of the

group for realizing more positive outcomes like better collaboration, more opportunities, greater creativity and innovation, etc.! Indeed, **Diversity + Open-mindedness** yields very different outcomes than **Diversity + Closed-mindedness**. And keep in mind, the diversity in the room has not changed. The only things that've changed are the people's mind-set, attitude, and appreciation of human differences; in short, of diversity.

If we want to understand the previous ideas in terms of inclusion and exclusion, consider these two general equations:

Diversity + Open-mindedness = Inclusion

Diversity + Closed-mindedness = Exclusion

Human diversity is potentially a powerful asset. We, both individuals and organizations, waste that asset when closed-mindedness prevails. Alternatively, the power of human differences is leveraged and unleashed when more

of us can be open-minded. A great benefit of appreciating closed-mindedness as the root problem rather than diversity is that we all, as individuals, can work on becoming more curious and open-minded. We do not have to wait for leaders on high to set up a program or initiative (though one can be helpful). And open-mindedness can aid us in many areas of our lives if one considers that open-mindedness is required for learning, for improving.

Speaking of improving, I have made a commitment to taking my golf game to another, better level. I will redirect my resources from buying new golf equipment to getting some golf lessons. I'll do my best to be open to the swing changes the teacher will invariably ask me to make. I plan on practicing and playing more. With a better understanding of what my root problem is, I am in a better position to return to single-digit handicap status. Unfortunately, I made this commitment after ordering a new set of clubs.

Examining Root Cause

To help you consider going beyond the superficial and what's easily seen, here are some questions to ask, an activity, and an assignment for this week.

- 1. First glance.** Share your reaction to the idea that “diversity is not the problem, it’s closed-mindedness.”
- 2. Looking inward.** How has closed-mindedness impacted you and your understanding of people and ideas that are “different”?
- 3. What if?** What if you and your organization started practicing open-mindedness? What would that look like?
- 4. Activity.** In a small group, discuss how a greater curiosity and open-mindedness could help your organization.

- 5. This week’s assignment.** Think about some ways you can personally practice curiosity and open-mindedness. What would they look like? Now, go practice.