How Do We Create More Equitable, Diverse, and Inclusive Organizations, and Why Does it Matter?

A White Male’s Perspective

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.
—Aboriginal Activists Group, Queensland, Australia 1970s

At a conference early in my scientific career, the presenter—an early-career woman—checked in with the session chair—a middle-aged male professor—to see how much time she had left before having to wrap up her talk. The session chair told her she had plenty of time, followed with “Either way, you look very pretty up there!” The misguided comment appeared to take the woman totally off-guard as she was visibly shaken for the rest of her presentation. No one in the audience, including myself, spoke up about this.

This is just one example of how sexism, one of many forms of oppression, manifests itself in our society in general, and in science and engineering in particular. Science and engineering are White, male-dominated fields. While the percentage of women in mathematics and statistics Bachelor’s degree programs has hovered around 45 percent in the past two decades, the percentage of women in undergraduate engineering and computer sciences curricula is closer to 20 percent. People of Color are similarly underrepresented in science and engineering curricula, and their numbers become even more scant when considering those enrolled in graduate degree programs. When I look around me at computational science conferences in the US, only about 10 percent of the audiences appear to be women, and very few appear to be Black, Native American, or Latino men.
This lack of equity, diversity, and inclusion in science and engineering has been recognized for many decades.\textsuperscript{2–5} Despite numerous efforts aimed at creating more equitable work environments in science and engineering for White women, People of Color, and members of other groups who are systematically targeted by oppression (see definitions in Figure 1), it often seems as if very little lasting progress has been made, and White men are being alienated in the process.\textsuperscript{6}

The reason lasting change is so hard to achieve is that it generally requires a significant shift in the ways in which an organization operates. As organizations and systems are made up of people, it requires personal changes for the organization to shift.\textsuperscript{7,8} This personal shift requires us to face the impacts of oppression. As we have often been conditioned to ignore such impacts, both on others and ourselves, this process can be deeply personal and uncomfortable.

**IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

In his book *The Tipping Point*,\textsuperscript{9} Malcolm Gladwell lays out a framework for understanding how word-of-mouth-epidemics (for example, diseases or new technology trends) move through groups of people. As laid out by Gladwell, organizational change (in analogy with a word-of-mouth epidemic) is subject to three rules: \textit{the law of the few}, \textit{the stickiness factor}, and \textit{the power of context}.

The law of the few states that spreading a new phenomenon starts with a relatively small set of people who have unique capabilities. In the context of diversity and inclusion, these might be people who have a very clear understanding of the nature of institutionalized oppression and how it affects everyone, people who are natural connectors with other people, and people who excel at communicating this knowledge to others.

The stickiness factor states that a new phenomenon or way of thinking will only catch on if it’s very sticky—that is, both very appealing and memorable. It’s not enough for diversity and inclusion to come across as important and necessary, it must be personally meaningful so it continues to be on our minds in everything we do long after the diversity training has ended, for example.

The power of context means that fledgling movements toward greater diversity and inclusion will only take hold if they are supported by their environment. Are resources properly prioritized to support staffing and program costs toward sustainable collective action? Are the changes rolled out in the full organization all at once or in smaller pilot groups, where tensions are easier to work out?

Although a lot can be written about each of these rules, this article focuses mainly on the second: the stickiness factor.

**WHY DO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MATTER?**

The stickiness factor pertains to the question, Why are diversity and inclusion important? Many answers to this question immediately come to mind. \textit{Egalitarianism}—the belief that all human beings are equally valued and therefore deserve equal rights and opportunities—is espoused by many as an ethical and moral imperative. Further, many studies\textsuperscript{10,11} have shown that a diverse and inclusive work environment improves team creativity and innovation, which effectively makes organizations more successful. This latter argument is often referred to as “the business case for diversity.”

However, while many individuals and organizations readily recognize these benefits and list them as motivation in their training courses, they rarely result in fundamental changes in how we go about our jobs and lives. We take a training class, and even if we like the material, the daily pressures of our lives, conditioned unawareness, and systematic structures that reinforce institutional oppression soon take over and we return to our “normal” ways without lasting change. In
other words: even if we liked the message, it was not sticky enough. It takes a much stronger motivation to go from check-the-box-type activities to personal and organizational change.

For a message to impact our daily lives in a sustained way, it needs to connect to something very close and specific to us. So what does such a personal connection look like in the context of equity, diversity, and inclusion? Naturally, the answer to this question will be different for every individual and each context.

FAILING TO STAND UP FOR MY VALUES

As a White male, and therefore on the nontarget side of racism and sexism, the evolution of my awareness has been a long journey. I was born in Belgium, a former colonial power, and grew up in a predominantly White, male environment. For example, I went to all-boys Catholic schools from elementary all the way through high school. And throughout my engineering curriculum, I similarly met very few women. In terms of People of Color (of any gender), I can probably count on one hand the number of classmates I had in Belgium who were not White. Needless to say, this left me ill-prepared in terms of cross-cultural communication skills, and without an understanding of, let alone relationships with, the majority of the world’s population.

Nevertheless, holding egalitarianism as a personal value, I would not intentionally discriminate against People of Color, women of any race, or others who are on the target side of institutionalized oppression. Moreover, I have engaged in many diversity and inclusion efforts in the places where I work and consider myself enlightened on the topic. However, in the conference incident mentioned at the beginning of this article, instead of speaking up when the incident occurred, or maybe approaching the professor afterward in private, I did not act. And when I discussed the incident with my male colleagues later on, everyone was uncomfortable and the topic was quickly dropped.

This wasn’t an isolated incident; there have been many others where I failed to call out or even notice when people were not being treated equitably, including by me. I lived under the assumption that all scientists and engineers are evaluated based on their intellectual contributions to the field, rather than their appearance or level of attractiveness. And when I witnessed behavior otherwise, I often minimized its impact or even missed it entirely because it is so common and because, as a White male, I have been conditioned to not see it myself. But deep down, I always knew that such discrimination was wrong, even though I felt unable to act against it.

THE LOSS

And this gets to the heart of the matter. Although creating an equitable, diverse, and inclusive environment is the right thing to do, and although it makes organizations that do it more successful, ultimately, the real reason I am engaged in equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts is because of the loss I experience as a result of institutional oppression. Everybody experiences a loss due to racism, sexism, or any other form of institutional oppression. The nature of this loss might differ depending on whether we find ourselves on the target or nontarget side of the oppression.

In the specific conference example I shared, the loss to me was the compromise of my value system and integrity. I was too scared of going against the social norms of sexism to speak out and, therefore, was complicit with male dominance. My White-male conditioning made me part of the oppressive system, while, on an intellectual level, I was trying to uphold a self-image of egalitarian advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Trying to ignore that degraded my integrity and the values I live by. And a lack of community left me with no support. Among my male colleagues who were aware of the injustice of this offense, our embarrassment and shame kept us from even talking about it with one another. I can only speak for myself, but it made me feel miserable and alone.
More in general, the loss I experience by being on the nontarget side of racism and sexism is a loss of connection with People of Color and women, a loss of connection with my fellow White men because our shame keeps us disconnected, and a loss of connection with myself and my humanity. This disconnect comes from the fact that we can only learn to ignore the injustice that targets others if we weaken our connection with them. Where we disconnect from one group of people, we also lose our ability to connect with everyone else, and with ourselves. Often, we realize this cost on some level, but we numb it through working harder, having a few drinks, buying faster cars, or other patterned behaviors.

Realizing what’s in it for me—or what isn’t in it for me if I maintain the status quo—is what makes the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion work sticky. With the awareness of the impact on me personally, it is on my mind in every choice I make: who to have on the team for our next research proposal, whose opinion I solicit in a project meeting, or which team member to select to lead the paper for a prestigious conference like Supercomputing. It motivates me to speak up when I see a man interrupt or “mansplain” a woman, or to ask questions about process when the only candidates being interviewed for a position are White and male. It drives me to look deep inside myself and investigate the patterned behaviors I learned as part of my White-male conditioning, and to work at undoing those patterns. It is a messy and oftentimes uncomfortable process, but my motivation is clear, and the change that comes with it is transformative.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

My continued engagement in equity, diversity, and inclusion has had a huge impact in my personal life as well as in my professional roles. Not only do I have many more connections than before, but the relationships are deeper and richer, and involve people from many different demographics. Group meetings have become more fun, and people come up with more creative solutions, as they begin to trust through experience that all ideas and opinions are valued—no matter how “out there” those ideas might be.

Where we create deep connections, we build community, and inspire others to follow suit, gently but boldly leading a wave of change throughout our organizations. This is how we make computational science more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional oppression</td>
<td>Systematically enforced beliefs or values shared by members of dominant cultures that reflect and benefit their own cultural norms, values and expectations and disempower those with less social and economic power (targeted groups). This results in structural, personal, and social inequalities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target groups</td>
<td>Groups or constituencies on the receiving or disempowered end of systemic oppression; groups who are not part of dominant US culture; groups who have less social and economic power than nontarget groups. On an institutional level, target groups include People of Color, Women, People who are Disabled, LGBT, Poor or Middle Class, Immigrants, Non-Christian, or Nonnative English speakers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontarget groups</td>
<td>Groups or constituencies on the dominant end of systemic oppression; groups who are part of dominant US culture; groups that have more social and economic power than target groups. On an institutional level, nontarget groups include People who are Able-Bodied, Heterosexual, White, Owning Class, US Born; Christian, Native English speakers, and Men.</td>
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Figure 1. Important definitions in the field of equity, diversity, and inclusion.7,8
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article benefited greatly from insights provided by and discussions with Nanci Luna Jiménez, Kathleen Rice, Melissa Miller, Alan Goff, and Lillian Roybal Rose.

REFERENCES


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