

Mission Critical: A New Frame for Diversity and Environmental Progress

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SUMMARY

The values and vision of environmentalism, diversity, and inclusion are inextricably linked. In the 21st century, the ability of environmental organizations to catalyze a positive common future for all people, beings, and places will depend on the commitment of leaders and organizations to make these explicit, intentional connections in every facet of their work. Diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence need to become major priorities at the organizational level if environmental and social change movements are to marshal the innovation, creativity, and expansive reach necessary to handle the complexity and scope of environmental challenges. Organizational and movement-wide impacts are at risk if diversity is not seen as mission critical.

KEY WORDS

Diversity, inclusion, cultural competence, organizational change, organization development, mission-driven rationale, vision, success, culture change, leadership development, professional development

As a Generation X latchkey kid, I watched a lot of television in the 1970s. Now, I live in a community that lacks access to cable television and am generally limited to gleaning pop culture via the Internet. But, every now and then, a random phrase pops into my head from my trove of childhood TV. As I think about diversity and the environmental movement, one image and phrase comes to mind. I see the flailing arms of the Robot in *Lost in Space*: “Warning! Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!”

The Robot may lack gravitas as a messenger chiming in on environmentalism’s future, but wikipedia.com’s description of this oft-repeated utterance is apt: “This catch phrase currently serves as a facetious method to inform an associate that they are about to make a stupid mistake – that there’s a factor he or she overlooked which ought to be taken into account.”

What is the mistake we are making as environmentalists, environmental leaders, environmental organizations, and as a movement? What is being overlooked that needs to be taken into account?

Diversity.

THE VISION THING

Donella Meadows was a stickler for vision. Dana, as she was known, was a best-selling author, syndicated columnist, systems dynamics researcher, and educator who believed no major endeavor should begin without a clear vision for the work to follow. Many years ago, from afar and without her knowledge, I adopted Dana, as a mentor. I never met her before her death in 2001, but today, I live in an eco-housing community that she co-created with many of my neighbors. That was the impact of a woman I never met but who guided and inspired me.

In our U.S. and nonprofit cultures of time-pressured, seemingly endless doing, we rarely take time to step back, reflect, and clarify or reassess the vision we are working toward. Without a compelling vision as context and horizon for my daily work, I find it harder to manage the inevitable stresses and frustrations that come with swimming upstream – the obstacles those of us who aspire to change the world face every day.

In a 1994 presentation, Dana marveled about how we “share our cynicism to total strangers. We can complain, we can talk about everything that will never work, but we can’t share our hopes, dreams, deepest longings” of “the world we would like to live in without being named naïve, unrealistic, idealistic.”¹ But, as Dana espoused, contemplating a vision has practical benefits. She said:

My experience is that I never know at the beginning how to get there, but as I articulate the vision, put it out, share it with people and it gets more polished and more real, the path reveals itself. And it would never reveal itself if I were not putting out the vision of what I really want and finding that other people really want it too. Holding on to the vision reveals the path.²

I was reminded of the power of vision again, at a recent meeting of the fledgling Institute for Inclusion where organization development (OD) practitioners envisioned a world where inclusion is common practice. I sat in my uncomfortable conference issue chair – my feet dangling as they always do in any seat made for people of average height – and closed my eyes: What will an inclusive world look like? What will it feel like? How will people behave? What things will be the same? What will be different?

The first images I had were of people amidst greenery. I saw a city. There were people out and about, walking on sidewalks, playing and eating in parks, sitting on benches and front porches. It was a lush landscape of trees and flowering bushes, community gardens big and small. It felt different because there was an array of people, many whom I don’t typically see, individuals who were blind or deaf, women in wheelchairs, amputees, and the elderly. I saw mixed-use development at its best, a range of housing types and sizes located near workplaces, stores, and libraries. People stood in line to board clean hybrid buses, no diesel spewing out the back. People had many visible differences – age, race, gender, disability – and they were talking, playing, and working together. People felt safe, and I felt safe watching them. The people I saw were different but they had equal access to the good life I could see – beautiful parks, healthy food, clean air and

¹ Donella Meadows: *Envisioning a Sustainable World*, speech/presentation at Third Biennial Meeting of the International Society for Ecological Economics, San Jose, Costa Rica, October 24-28, 1994. The video of the presentation can be viewed at www.uvm.edu/giee/beyondenvironmentalism/Meadows.mov.

² *Ibid.*

water, thriving workplaces. In my vision, it was a given, a foundational skill that people were comfortable and skilled engaging across difference. In my vision, I knew there was a lot less pain and suffering.

After the exercise I wrote down much more, but as I shared my vision with the others in my assigned small group, I had some realizations. Fundamentally, my vision was based on my belief in a common future, the shared destiny that ties all people, beings, and places together. To me, that's the heart of inclusion. We share a future, and the reality I create for others – people and living creatures unlike me – is what I make for myself. The visioning exercise reminded me that I couldn't separate inclusion from environmentalism or environmental work from diversity. For my vision to become reality, there must be an intentional, strategic, sustained effort on behalf of the environmental movement, its organizations and leaders, to make diversity and inclusion foundational assets, of all we do.

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OUR VALUES, OUR VISION

Most environmentalists fight every day for the rights of the planet, the subordinated natural places and animal species who are abused, neglected, allowed to die, or actively killed because so many people see those places and beings as “them” not “us.” Their fates decline because of an adherence to mental models that tell us that our destiny is not tied to theirs. I see this same mental model applied to people who are different. This subordination and separation exists among humans at the group level. The us vs. them dynamic is the same, whether them is an endangered species or ecosystem or poor people, people of color, gays and lesbians, women, or people with disabilities. It's not just about individual behavior – niceness across difference – it's about power, the institutional power and structural discrimination and the invisible ways that privilege and this domination mindset play out and are built into all human systems and institutions. It's a structure that must be altered if this movement is to succeed.

Until we address what divides us, we will not be able to collaborate with allies who share many of our values but little of the field's current

demographics. The authors of *Soul of Environmentalism* eloquently made the argument that the future success of environmentalism lies, in part, in our ability to create transformative alliances with “new leadership that transcends boundaries.”³ In many cases, they argue, movements with intertwined histories are failing to leverage collective power because of our inability to see our shared history and values. I believe it’s because we have not acknowledged the impact of oppression and group-level power in our movement and because we don’t often talk honestly and deeply about our differences. Such failures prohibit the creation of constructive, authentic partnerships.

In my work with progressive organizations, I have to make the case that at the organizational level “the right thing to do” isn’t enough. Values do matter, however, and for the environmental movement, unlike some institutions, diversity is also about authenticity. Most of the people I know in the environmental movement believe in social justice and equality for all people and tie their professional work to their values. Many people choose their life’s calling because they seek integration of ethics and action. They want to create the world they envision. Organization and movement-wide work on diversity and inclusion, of which personal learning and skill building is an integral part, aids in the synergy of these ideas.

Toward that end, how can we authentically practice what we preach? How can we speak about social justice and our progressive values (as many environmentalists identify politically) if we have environmental organizations that look like exclusive clubs?

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An exclusive culture comprised of people with privilege in our society is not a manifestation of those values. Furthermore, if we create and sustain organizations that are not more representative of the diversity of this country it gives easy ammunition for our critics to paint us as hypocritical and elitist. This, in turn, decreases our potential impact and limits our capacity to expand our constituencies.

³ Gelobter, Michel et al. 2002. *The Soul of Environmentalism*. Downloadable at: <http://www.soul ofenvironmentalism.org/>: 27.

CHANGING REALITIES

Diversity and inclusion matter to any organization in the 21st century whose work is complex, requires innovation, and aims to impact large numbers of people. Additionally, environmentalists and our institutions have unique reasons for needing to embrace fully the work of creating inclusive organizations and leveraging the gifts of a diverse community of professionals, activists, donors, and volunteers to influence people in all walks of life.

The complexity of the task before environmentalists is monumental. We are trying to change mindsets, policies, and behavior at every level. Our collective aim is to integrate the consideration of environmental impacts into all human endeavors, including the decisions of individuals, communities, companies, nations, and the global community. This complexity requires a vast array of skills and expertise, and an ability to collectively reach into every community and facet of society. As new technologies emerge and cultural norms shift, environmental work has to adapt to keep up. We need organizations that are as effective and innovative as possible. We need a workforce and volunteers who are willing, able, and supported in doing their absolute best work. We can't afford to miss out on a person's creativity or ingenuity because they don't fit our type based on limited notions of who is an environmentalist, who can do the job.

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Diversity helps create an environment that fosters innovation and creativity, thinking that matches the challenges that we're aiming to find solutions for. The problems we aim to solve aren't static, nor are they simple. The very nature of environmental challenges raises the bar for how imaginative we need to be, not only in crafting workable solutions but also in selling them to the world, from individuals and the cars they buy to the purchasing decisions of billion-dollar public companies.

As the end of the first decade of the 21st century approaches, predictions of the changing racial demographics of the United States

are commonly known and oft repeated: People of color will soon be the majority in the United States. In fact, people of color are already the majority in a number of U.S. cities. In contrast, studies of the demographics of the environmental movement show that people of color are underrepresented in comparison to their numbers in the U.S. civilian workforce. The environmental movement is behind.

THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS

The organizational level is a particularly relevant level of system for work on diversity and inclusion in the environmental field. We don't have one environmental movement. Rather, we have a complex network of organizations and coalitions that are connected, often loosely, by commonality of issue area, size, or geography, among other features. No one tent exists that convenes organizations working on wilderness, regulatory policy, land preservation, green buildings, environmental justice, climate change, toxics, and green investment or business practices. To change our movement, we need individuals who believe in the value of diversity and inclusion. However, we won't have large-scale impact until those values are integrated into organizational policies, practices, and culture.

Organizations today are being forced to live by their wits . . . A single person's brilliance or a single group's point of view is no longer enough to sustain an organization's growth. Tomorrow's successful organizations will be those that harness the collective and synergistic brilliance of all their people, not just an elite few . . . Many organizations will fail to make these changes because the changes seem too radical.

Those organizations will not survive.⁴

In *The Paradox of Choice*, social theorist Barry Schwartz argues that individuals make choices from risk aversion more than potential gain, a salient detail of a more complex economic principle called prospect theory.⁵ If it's true that "losses hurt more than gains satisfy," as Schwartz writes,⁶ then sharing this Miller and Katz quote and articu-

⁴ Miller, Frederick A. and Katz, Judith H. 2002. *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Power of Diversity*. Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco.

⁵ Schwartz, Barry. 2004. *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, Harper Perennial, New York: 67-73.

⁶ Ibid.

lating a few hypotheses about our potential losses may have the impact I seek in this essay.

Here are a few of my hypotheses about potential losses the environmental movement will face if diversity and inclusion are not made organizational and movement-wide priorities:

1. Environmental issues will be marginalized based on the movement's visible demographics. Environmental issues and environmentalists will be perceived as white, upper-middle class, suburban, "boutique-y," diminishing our capacity to build a broad, diverse political and societal constituency. Our ability to weave values and actions of environmentalism into every facet of life will be hobbled and we will be unable to defend against our marginalization.
2. The environmental movement will wither without the new ideas, innovation, and broader perspectives diversity brings. Outdated approaches, single viewpoints, and one way of being, thinking, and doing will predominate and the movement will calcify.
3. Talented people will leave organizations and environmental work, based on their experience of being undervalued, unappreciated, burned out, and pressured to conform to organizational cultures that do not allow them to be who they are or do their best work. Increasingly, they will flee work environments where covert and overt hostility to differences becomes untenable as other more inclusive workplace options become available.
4. Environmental work will be the domain of the upper-middle class, people who can "afford" to work in environmental professions, further separating the movement and its organizations from the class-based realities of the vast majority of people in the U.S. and around the world.

As an enviro – an organizer, policy wonk, and manager in environmental organizations – for twenty years, I have seen ample anecdotal evidence that these hypotheses about the future are current reality. At the same time, I believe we need to do more work to quantify and test these hypotheses more rigorously.

Prospect theory notwithstanding, I still believe positive visions are motivating. There is a growing community of environmentalists

working to integrate diversity and inclusion into the fabric of the movement. In my current work as a consultant, trainer, coach, and organizer, I'm driven by the desire to test the following positive hypotheses at the organizational level:

Hypothesis: An organization that integrates diversity and inclusion in their internal operations and programs will:

1. Have greater competitive advantage in instilling the values of its mission and making its message relevant and resonant with the U.S. public and global audience. They will win more often and in more arenas because they will have the skills to engage with the diverse public and political constituencies we aim to serve and engage.
2. Have wider opportunities for grants and successfully solicit support from a more diverse base of individual donors and other contributors, ultimately increasing their fundraising and development outcomes. As more funders look for diversity and cultural competence, these organizations will rise to the top and, at a minimum, avoid being cut off from funding because they don't meet basic criteria. They will tap into currently ignored individuals, expanding their membership, networks of financial contributors, and program and event participants.
3. Become preferred employers in the field, increasing their capacity to retain and recruit staff from all backgrounds. They will be known for being dynamic, creative, healthy places to work where people are valued and employees' work lives are enriched because of the diversity of their colleagues and the skills they have learned to engage across difference and leverage the diversity they have.
4. Have more members and constituents who align themselves with the organization. They will have the capacity to connect with people of a wide array of backgrounds and based on their knowledge and experience, they will have more effective communications and networking capabilities.

Of course, we could make many more hypotheses and it will take years to test these hypotheses in the environmental and social change

arena, but more and more people are game to participate in this real-life research, from the smallest interactions to the most expansive organizational policies. While research on how these hypotheses are playing out in the nonprofit sector lags behind studies of the private sector, there is much to learn from other analyses. These hypotheses are modeled loosely on those proposed and tested by sociologist Cedric Herring, who studies the business case for diversity. In a recent study, *Does Diversity Pay?: Racial Composition of Firms and the Business Case for Diversity*, based on analysis of the National Organizations Survey, he found that more racial diversity was correlated with increased sales revenue, higher number of customers, larger market share, and greater profits relative to competitors.⁷ “There is now tangible evidence that there is a positive relationship between the racial diversity of firms and their business functioning,” Herring concluded.⁸

Of course, diversity is about more than race. Also, there are differences in how private sector profitability is measured from mission-driven social change outcomes. But Herring’s work and that of many others has relevance to issues of diversity and inclusion in the environmental field.

DIVERSITY STARTS WITH MISSION

In my experience, environmental organizations typically look at diversity issues from the perspective of numbers and from a definition that equates diversity with the existence of people of color within an organization. Regularly, I hear from colleagues who say “I need more people of color in my organization. Can you find me a person of color for this job opening or to join our board?” While they may have good intentions, to me, it’s important to approach this differently: Why do diversity and inclusion matter to this organization? How are diversity and inclusion necessary for the organization to achieve its mission? How is the creation of an inclusive culture necessary for the performance and well-being of employees, board members, and other internal stakeholders? How will the organization fail and what are the risks that will need to be managed if diversity and inclusion are not foundational organizational assets?

⁷ Herring, Cedric, *Does Diversity Pay?: Racial Composition of Firms and the Business Case for Diversity*, August 2006, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago and Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois. Available at <http://www.diversityinc.org/ssi/pdf/DoesDiversityPay0806.pdf>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Until an organization clarifies its mission-driven rationale for diversity and inclusion, effort spent diversifying its staff and board – by race or any other group membership – can be ineffective and oftentimes has unintentional negative impacts. Bringing in people who are different and expecting them to think, act, and be like everyone else is oppressive and confines the diversity those people bring. Without an effort to change organizational culture, recruiting difference for the sake of numbers can leave people feeling tokenized and unsupported as an “only” or one of very few people who stand out for their difference. Rosabeth Moss-Kanter’s studies show that when women make up less than 15 percent of the workplace, they are more likely to be stereotyped and tokenized based on their gender than in groups with more women. Sociologist Herring argues that “the experiences and consequences of tokenism hold true for other” types of differences as well.⁹ Diversity without inclusion may change the staff photo, but it can also create personal harm and organizational risks if not part of a larger, coherent organizational commitment. Efforts to diversify have a much more powerful, positive impact when they’re connected to culture change and building skills to engage and work across difference.

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Diversity and inclusion can’t be seen as random work that can be dropped when priorities change. They need to be seen as mission critical, in the context and service of an organization’s mission. If they’re not mission critical, why do the work? If it’s not a part of the organization’s work, they should be honest and transparent in saying so to manage expectations within the organization and outside of it. That too, of course, is a choice.

Numbers do matter, and race is one of many important differences that make a difference in our society. However, representational diversity – the numbers – is no proof that organizations are “there.”

⁹ Ibid.

There is no “there,” in this work, no being done, no time when you check off the box and call it a day, just as none of us ever reach the personal environmental equivalent of the Holy Grail. Every OD consultant can name organizations that look great on paper or in their pictures, yet do a far from admirable job of diversity and inclusion upon examination: how people are treated, the organizational culture, and the consistency by which they practice internally what they preach externally.

A clear, widely embraced, and jointly-defined, mission-driven rationale is necessary because the integration of diversity and inclusion can't rely on the rationale that “it's the right thing to do.” While connecting diversity to organizational values, and making an organization's work consistent with beliefs of employees and leadership is a good thing, it is not sufficient to marshal the organizational resources to engage and sustain this work. The “right thing to do” easily gets lost amidst seemingly more pressing organizational priorities. It requires an inextricable tie to the organization's mission to sustain the lifelong work of culture change and partnering across difference. The mission has to drive the integration of diversity and inclusion throughout an organization's programs and processes and the creation of an intentional – not de facto, status quo – culture where people feel valued and respected, enabling them to do their best work, as Katz and Miller stress in their book, *The Inclusion Breakthrough*.¹⁰

While there are often similarities in organizations' mission-driven rationales, each one is unique because of the specificity of each organization's mission. What often matters most is the process of creating the rationale, getting people aboard and creating ownership of the work of diversity and inclusion. True ownership is only possible when an organization's employees and board members see themselves in the work. Charitable expressions of helping others – “those people” – via diversity initiatives aren't enough. Individuals have to believe that they will benefit from organizational change. They must feel that the organization will be a better place for everyone, not just people in subordinated groups, if the culture is more inclusive. They must see opportunities for their own professional and personal development as they develop new skills and are enriched by a more dynamic environment because of increasing diversity in the organization.

¹⁰ Miller, Frederick A. and Katz, Judith H. 2002. *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Power of Diversity*. Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco.

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Organizations across the environmental movement are taking on the long-term strategic work of integrating diversity and inclusion into their culture, policies, practices, and skill sets. At Diversity Matters, we exist to support this growing community, providing resources and services to make diversity and inclusion foundational assets of environmental and social change organizations and leadership. We have a vision for strengthening environmental and social change through diversity and inclusion, and we’re creating a movement for people who share our vision to make it reality.

Books have been written about the phases of work this typically entails, but these are a few of the steps organizations need to take.

- Clarify the mission-driven rationale for diversity and inclusion.
- Assess the state of diversity and inclusion within your organization. What is the current state?
- Decide where you want to go, what you want to do, and what skills and resources you need to get there.
- Build skills, knowledge, awareness, and find support for implementing what you want to do.
- Integrate and institutionalize – build diversity and inclusion into the fabric of everything the organization does, ensuring the work is sustained.

WORK THAT IS FOREVER

More than 10 years ago, I went to a meeting where David Crockett, a former member of the Chattanooga City Council, concluded a talk by saying, “It takes all of us and it takes forever.” This pithy line is as relevant to the work that I do now on diversity and social justice, as to what I did then on policies to create sustainable communities.

A few months ago, when I sat in that uncomfortable chair envisioning an inclusive world, another thought came to my mind. In my lifetime, I hope “environmentalists” disappear. I hope we won’t need that term to describe a relatively small group of people on the planet because that group will include everyone. The values and actions of environmentalism will be so embedded in every day thinking and living, that it will be taken for granted. That will not happen until we see the connection between what we do as environmentalists and what it takes to make it possible for people to walk freely in the world, able to share their gifts and unconstrained by discrimination. It won’t happen until we live up to integrating environment, economy, and equity so that equality doesn’t continually fall off the table.

We can lead by creating that space in environmental organizations. In that work is our own liberation and ability to reach new collective heights of impact for the world we want to see, to live in, and to pass on to those that follow. We can heed the Robot’s warning. The danger will be averted because we paid attention and changed our course.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Angela Park is an independent consultant and founder and director of Diversity Matters, a nonprofit organization that aims to make diversity and inclusion foundational assets of environmental and social change leaders and organizations. In addition, she serves as a consultant with the Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group and Elsie Y. Cross Associates and is a writer with articles published most recently in *The Diversity Factor* and *Grist Magazine*.

Ms. Park brings government, nonprofit, and private sector experience to her expertise on diversity and inclusion, organizational culture change, sustainable development policy, environmental justice, community development, and leadership. She has testified before Congress and state legislatures; consults to foundations, community-based organizations, national social and environmental policy organizations, Fortune 50 companies, and educational institutions; and lectures at universities across the country. Previously, she worked at The White House in both terms of the Clinton/Gore administration, directed state level sustainable development policy initiatives at the Center for Policy Alternatives, and co-founded and served as deputy director of the Environmental Leadership Program.

Ms. Park participated in the inaugural class of the Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program, graduated from the NTL Institute's Diversity Practitioner Certificate Program, and was named a Young Woman of Achievement by the Women's Information Network. She lives on an organic farm and 270-acre ecological co-housing community in Vermont.

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