

THE POWER OF DIVERSITY

TOPIC OVERVIEW

Latonia Craig, Ed.D. (she, her)

AWARENESS

What is Diversity, Equity and Inclusion?

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are core values that help shape, define and enrich a successful organization. Diversity asks the question, “who is in the space?” Equity responds with “who is trying to get in the space and can’t?” Inclusion asks, “is this environment safe for everyone who wants to be in the space to feel like they belong?” Diversity makes us stronger. Equity makes us better, and inclusion builds community where everyone contributes.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

- 1 Value diversity.** Valuing diversity does not mean that you must agree with everything, but it means you are open to better understanding and respecting DEI concepts and principles.
- 2 Self-reflect.** Dig deep and drill into who you are. Think about what you believe and how you came to hold those beliefs.
- 3 Assess your cultural knowledge.** We don’t know what we don’t know. Own where you are in the process and then identify gaps and seek knowledge to become better informed about DEI.

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients and community.

- 1** Continue to Module 2 of Journey for Teams.
- 2** Make connections. Do you know all of the names of your peers, employees, and clients? Establish an easy way to learn names by associating something interesting about them to their name.
- 3** End meetings by highlighting accomplishments and celebrating the work of individual members and teams.
- 4** Be open to constructive criticism. Feedback is a gift to help you grow.
- 5** Set behavior expectations for yourself and others.

TOPIC ESSAY

The Power of Diversity

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are core values that help shape, define and enrich a successful organization. Diversity asks the question, “who is in the space?” Equity responds with, “who is trying to get in the space and can’t?” Inclusion asks, “is this environment safe for everyone who wants to be in the space to feel like they belong?” Diversity makes us stronger. Equity makes us better, and inclusion builds community where everyone contributes. Diversity represents the collective intelligence and ability of an engaged community. Our individual experiences and contributions combined build synergies in ways that spark innovation and opportunity. From our clients, patients, employees, partners, peers, and communities — our stories are all interconnected. The delicate intricacies of our individual and historical experiences make us unique.

I remember seeing a headline that said, “Ice is a window to the past.” Climate scientists are using deep ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland to help them understand the climate in the past. By drilling down, they can reach ice that fell as snow hundreds, thousands, and millions of years ago. Analyzing that ice, scientists can learn what the climate was like then and how it has changed.

If we were to dig deeper into our lives, our own experiences, how far down would it take us to reach that ice, that thing or things, that experience, or experiences that have shaped us to be who we are? What would we find? More importantly, how might that ice from 40 or more years ago differ from our ice found today?

What do we know about ice? Ice is a solid substance, and it has a definite shape. Ice is translucent as it does not always allow light to pass through it in a direct path. Ice is less dense than liquid water, allowing it to float in the water. When liquid water freezes into the ice, the overall volume increases.

Humans are shaped by our experiences and memories. Much like ice, humans are solid beings. There are parts of our life that are undisguised, like a name that gives us identity, but the direct path to form deep connection is not always clear. We are bound by our comfort zone. It limits us in the human connection process. To step outside of this zone — the possibilities are endless. Similar to ice, as liquid water increases its volume, exposure to new things and people increases our capacity for growth. The more experiences we have, the more aware we become.

Experiential diversity is based on life experiences that inform and shape our emotional universe. Our actions, belief systems, perceptions, and relationships are inextricably linked to our experiences. Diversity is multifaceted. Every one of us represents varying dimensions of diversity. While I may identify as a Black woman, I recognize that I am also able-bodied, married, a mother, a daughter, a first-generation college student, and a Christian. The layering of our intersecting identities is loaded with joy, pain, privilege, and misfortune. Our stories are complex, but grasping this involution is critical to our ability to connect and understand. The social location that we all occupy contributes meaning to life. It gives shape to the ice within us and the changing environment we all occupy.

Research indicates that we do not see the world objectively but through cultural conditioning — a process through which we absorb and interpret norms and messaging from our environment and translate them into what we perceive as acceptable behaviors. To interrupt this process, it is imperative that we pause and reflect on how our perspective and position may diverge from others. Learning to listen and listening to learn can condition our minds to embrace changed behavior.

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For instance, it is common for individuals to use mental shortcuts when meeting new people. These mental shortcuts are linked to our past and influenced by stored data in our brains to help process information. Instinctively, this data may inform our behavior consciously and unconsciously and result in socially constructed categories and poor judgment. Pausing gives us the ability to circumvent our choices and shift our thinking towards a paradigm that remains open to difference. We tend to categorize people into different groups based on commonalities that are familiar to us. Familiarity is comfortable. Familiarity is expected. Familiarity is safe.

Transformation

To challenge familiarity, especially in the DEI space, we can look to the tool of intercultural competency — the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in social interactions. Competency does not equal mastery. People become interculturally competent through learning processes. It's the transformational process of learning, defined as a continuous revising of one's meaning perspectives. Continuously questioning and evaluating our why to promote clarity and accountability. Remaining open to meeting with and learning from new people heightens our ability to adapt, empathize, and motivate us to perform and understand. All these things bring us to a place where we can process real experiences in real-time. Intercultural competency celebrates diversity in all its forms and encourages individuals to do the work. When we each do our part in the understanding of ourselves and others is where we can access the power of diversity.

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Why is this important?

The key to collective intelligence is diversity. An organization that has a strong sense of identity through its members can serve two purposes 1) foster cultural integration and 2) direct organizational action. An organization that recognizes the value of its diverse members can grow in ways that are not stifled by its historical past but still be responsive and relevant to its current and future condition (Page, 2008).

Accessing the power of diversity is up to us. ■

References

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Dr. Latonia Craig is the inaugural chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer for the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Prior to this appointment, Dr. Craig led the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine. She has devoted most of her career to providing educational programs in social change and changing the conversation from diversity and inclusion to inclusive excellence. As assistant dean for inclusive excellence, she led the development of programming and initiatives, modeling innovative practices that introduce diversity into the College of Veterinary Medicine's systems, structure, and culture. Dr. Craig's work has focused on recruiting and retaining underrepresented students with intentionality by transitioning them from undergraduate to graduate school and attaining terminal degrees through her award-winning Vet Up! and Check-in and Connect programs. Under Dr. Craig's leadership, Purdue University College of Veterinary

Medicine is ranked "Top College for Diversity" by *Insight to Diversity* magazine and named a "Diversity Champion," the first distinction given to a veterinary school.

Dr. Craig has been featured on the cover of *Today's Woman* magazine and selected as a "Top Forty Under 40" in *Louisville Business First* magazine. She earned a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in Pan-African studies from the University of Louisville, a master's degree in educational leadership from the University of Cincinnati, and a doctorate in leadership education from Spalding University.

RESOURCES

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