

Posted: January 05, 2015

The health care PRIME directive

Diversity equals greater innovation

By *Triche Guenin*



If $A=B$ and $B=C$, then A must = C . This is the rationale being employed by the PRIME collaborative in its latest strategic drive to facilitate Colorado becoming one of the top three digital health care markets in the nation. In this case, A represents diversity, B equates to innovation and C is the Colorado Digital health marketplace.

In a recent joint PRIME/Colorado Health Foundation initiative to identify and jumpstart the current players in Colorado's digital health care community, it became painfully obvious that these organizations were predominantly headed up by white males. And since there is documented proof that diverse teams produce more innovative products/services, there is now a concerted effort to provide opportunities and encourage those representing the diverse segment of the Colorado population with this homogenous group.

PRIME contacted NCWIT (National Center of Women & Information Technology) to support this cause and provide education/awareness to the Colorado business environment. Lucy Sanders, an engineer/inventor/VP and longtime employee of Bell Labs, is co-founder/CEO of NCWIT. She shared data to support the notion that diverse teams do, in fact, produce more innovative products/services. Her focus happened to have a gender/technology lens, but the same holds true for other groups (for example, men in nursing).

"Societal bias negatively impacts many people and especially women in computing," Sanders says. "It's a fundamental part of leadership to understand the causes of such bias and take steps to address it."

Some facts shared at the last joint PRIME/NCWIT meeting included the following (for specific sources, please contact NCWIT):

- Groups with greater diversity solve complex problems better and faster than homogenous groups – Scott Page study (2009)
- A group's collective intelligence is not predicted by the IQ's of its individual members; but if a group includes more women (diverse), its collective intelligence rises – Woolley/Chabris/Pentland/Hashmi /Malone study (2010)
- Nationally, women comprise 57 percent of US professional occupations, however only 26 percent of them hold technology jobs, and less the 5 percent of them are in technology leadership roles – NCWIT (2014). Individual companies are starting to release their internal stats: Google (6/2014) – 17 percent women, Sendgrid (Boulder based) (9/2014) – 9 percent women.

The bottom line: U.S. organizations are losing opportunities in developing innovative technology solutions by failing to utilize diverse teams in their product/service development. Colorado can learn from this and can lead the national charge by focusing on this basic element. Technical women aren't broken and technical men aren't the enemy. The culprit is societal bias (shared by both women and men) that manifests itself in technical cultures.

We all bring unconscious biases to the work place. But these "shortcuts" sometimes make us misinterpret or miss things. These biases also wreak havoc in the organizational environment by impacting subtle dynamics (via perceptions and/or stereotypes) and institutional barriers (e.g. within the hiring process).

A number of studies prove this:

- Well documented work by Frank Flynn showing how the same resume is viewed differently based on the name at the top – Howard or Heidi. Depending on the resume it was perceived to either be power-hungry/self-promoting/disingenuous vs competent/effective as well as whether that person would be liked/hired/emulated.
- "Blind" orchestra auditions, with musicians behind a curtain, increased female musicians hired by 25 percent to 46 percent - Goldin & Rouse (2000)
- Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>), founded by three scientists, is an NPO focused on implicit social cognition. This collaboration between international researchers delves into the thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control. This may explain why the Go Daddy advertisement of a beautiful woman and a dorky male sitting next to each other tacitly implies which one the audience will choose to fix their IT issues

So, now that we know these biases exist and prevent the optimal use of technical talent, what can organizational leaders do to overcome this issue?

1. Look in the mirror and recognize the signs (e.g. folks that don't speak up in meetings, those who are reluctant to take on leadership positions, anyone who is overly critical of their own work and/or discounts their performance).
2. Make diversity part of the corporate DNA/brand right from the start (e.g. DON'T depend on diverse employees to advance your diversity goals).
3. Expand sources of future talent (e.g. DON'T lower hiring standards, make sure you are hiring for the things that matter).
4. Remove bias from business processes (e.g. look at what the VOICE, the competition to scout out the nation's most talented singing voice, has done by not allowing the judges to "see" the talent until they've agreed the individual is "worthy").
5. Foster inclusive team meetings and culture; hold staff accountable (e.g. DON'T form development teams with just one diverse person).
6. Provide legitimate credit and encouragement (e.g. small tokens of sincere recognition are appreciated).
7. Audit your physical space for gender vibes (e.g. Fri BAH's that essentially are beer bashes).

Pam DeBellis, Principal of Mackie DeBellis Associates and meeting attendee, called it a "painful reminder of how far our society still has to go....when we have leadership that is committed to diversity, inclusion, and best outcomes, then we will truly make progress."

Essentially, inclusivity improves the environment for all genders/ethnicities. And ultimately, the organization that embraces this will benefit with the most innovative products/services. PRIME's challenge to the Colorado business community is to focus on diversity so as to put Colorado on the map regarding innovation, specifically in the area of digital health care.

For more info:

- **PRIME Health Collaborative of Colorado at <http://primehealthco.com/>**
- **National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) at <http://www.ncwit.org>**

Triche Guenin is President of Partners Through Change, Inc., a process improvement firm that helps organizations become more efficient/effective in their day-to-day operations. She can be reached at 303-777-9680 or www.partnersthroughchange.com.
