

Four Frames for Equity

As we continue to have discussions about racial inequity and racial tensions, and what we, as organizations, as departments, and as individuals can do to create positive changes in the experiences of our African American students, staff, and faculty, it could be helpful to present a different way of thinking about these efforts. The Four Frames for Equity were adapted from Kolb, Fletcher, Meyerson, Merrill-Sands, & Ely, 2003, first written with regard to promoting gender equity, but can fit with efforts to promote racial equity as well.

The Four Frames present different categorizations of activities that are intended to promote and achieve equity. The Four Frames can also offer some reasoning as to why, after over 50 years of focused activities reaching back to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's, we do not see more progress, either in our organizations or in society at large.

Frame 1: Fix the Under-represented Group

Central to this understanding of a vision for equity is the assumption that groups are socialized differently, and that this different socialization process results in deficiencies in the underrepresented group as compared to the majority, e.g. African Americans as compared to whites, or women as compared to men. Many would characterize this as a "deficiency model," where the underrepresented group is naturally deficient in some way(s) as compared to their majority peers. Removing or mitigating the deficiency through education, mentoring, or other affinity group supports are activities that generally fall into this framework. For example, mentoring programs for underrepresented minorities or leadership development seminars for women are predicated on helping members of the underrepresented group with something that the majority group does not have issues with. This approach is most often the one taken by authors of pop culture books on helping members of an underrepresented group succeed, such as Gail Evans' *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman: What Men Know About Success That Women Need to Learn* (2000).

There are benefits to this approach, however. These programs and books can help individual group members succeed, and once successful, they can be role models to others in their group. These types of programs often bring together members of the underrepresented group, and this togetherness can become an empowering and supportive atmosphere in and of itself. But the limitations of this approach are significant. First, this approach places the blame for a lack of achievement or advancement on the individual person, at two levels. As discussed, the presumption that members of the underrepresented group need a special program to learn what members of the majority already know is to imply that members of the underrepresented group are lacking or deficient. In addition, if the intervention does not produce success, that is, if the intervention does not result in greater achievements by the members of the underrepresented group who participate in it, then this frame can imply that it is the participants themselves who are to blame for their failures (Phipps, 2007). Second, this

approach tends to universalize group member's experiences, ignoring the very important intersections of such other identity markers such as gender, race, class, nationality, and ethnicity (Young, 1985), which privilege (or de-privilege) individual group members very differently. Third, this approach to equity does nothing to challenge the system, structures, and organizations – the culture – that makes achieving representation and/or success more difficult for some groups, even though some members of underrepresented groups may become successful.

Frame 2: Create Equal Opportunities

This framework for equity assumes that members of different groups are more similar than they are different, but that the causes of underrepresentation are difference in access to opportunities that lead to advancement. Accordingly, the solutions to promote equity are focused on reducing or eliminating structural barriers, such as creating policies like affirmative action, stop the tenure clock, or work-life benefits. Virginia Valian, author of "Why So Slow?", is a psychologist who theorizes within this framework. Valian specifically argues that women do not have equal access to opportunities because of discrimination within organizations. She argues that most of this discrimination is unconscious, and that eliminating it requires first acknowledging it exists, primarily through education. Her thinking challenges the notion that organizations are meritocracies and also recognizes structures of power within those organizations that create discrimination. Valian's thinking can easily be applied to other underrepresented groups.

The policies that result from this framework do help with recruiting, retaining, and advancing members of underrepresented groups. However, these policies do not in and of themselves change the culture of the organization, and do not recognize aspects of the organizations that produce discrimination. There may also be backlash against those who take advantage of these policies like stop the tenure clock policies, thereby creating an additional source of discrimination for those who take advantage of them. This backlash can impact affirmative action policies in that being labeled an "affirmative action hire" can damage the credibility of the underrepresented new hire. In sum, efforts within this framework, do not, by themselves, create or allow for equality.

Frame 3: Celebrate Differences

In this framework for equity, members of underrepresented groups are seen as being socialized differently than the members of the majority, and this socialization process produces two groups of people who are fundamentally different from each other. The central tenet of the "celebrate differences" frame is to affirm and value these differences. An example of an equity effort that fits within this frame is diversity training to promote tolerance and understanding. Other efforts such as promoting and trying to leverage skills and qualities which

members of underrepresented groups are explicitly seen to have (such as collaboration, teamwork, and nurturing for women) also fit within this framework. These efforts can have positive effects, such that differences between groups are recognized and some of these differences may become more valued in practice.

However, there are limitations with this line of thinking. Like the “fix the underrepresented group” framework, the “celebrate differences” framework tends to universalize the experiences of members of underrepresented groups, and thus conclude that all group members are the same. There is no room for a member of an underrepresented group who does not fit with the majority’s view of their group. It ignores the intersectional effects of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. This framework also serves to reinforce the very stereotypes that have exacerbated exclusion from the profession, and reiterates hierarchies through emphasizing differences.

It seems clear that while the “create equal opportunities” framework focuses on the sameness of groups, and the “celebrate differences” framework focuses on the differences between groups, the end result in either frame does not create equality. It is this tension that Elizabeth Spelman writes of when she says, “it is possible to oppress people both by ignoring their differences and by denying their sameness” (Spelman, 1988). Martha Minow similarly states, “Both focusing on and ignoring difference risk recreating it. This is the dilemma of difference” (1984, p. 160).

Frame 4: Revise Culture

This framework removes the focus from differences being tied to individuals (as the other frames assume) and instead focuses on the organizational culture. Schein (1992) discusses organizational culture as having three levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. Artifacts may be such things as structures and policies (“this is how we do things”). Beliefs and values would encompass such things as philosophies, goals, aspirations (“this is who we are, and who we want to become”). Basic underlying assumptions determine such things as behavior, perceptions and feelings (“this is how we act and treat each other”). Each of these levels constitutes perceptions of the majority and is constituted through majority members’ perceptions. For example, the artifacts, the beliefs and values, and the underlying assumptions of an organization are built on a set of social practices that were primarily designed by and for white, heterosexual, privileged men. The normativity of culture is what prevents most participants from seeing its discriminatory nature; it appears to be a meritocracy even as it works to uphold inequity.

The vision of achieving equity through this framework is to for the members of the organization to engage in a process that critiques the culture to make visible its discriminatory nature, so that a equitable set of artifacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions can be created and put into place. In practice, however, achieving this vision of equity is extremely

difficult, resistance to change is deep, and whatever changes are created can be difficult to sustain long enough to become “normal”. However, we must remember that organizations are perfectly designed to produce the outcomes they do. If we don’t like the outcomes we are seeing, we need to change the organization, its culture, values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions.

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