"Why throw the baby out with the bathwater?"

Words are powerful!

That understatement underscores a fascinating question that’s at the center of diversity debates nowadays. And it is this: has the word "diversity" become so baggage-laden that it’s time to swap it with something more palatable, perhaps "inclusion?" To the nodding heads out there, I say whoa, not so fast. Let’s think about this before we “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Read the following email I got from a "Diversity" VP at a Fortune 500 company, a member of a 40-company diversity consortium I founded last year:

"Terry, there’s a cloud above called "Diversity Fatigue." It’s hovering at my office. I’ve been asked by some of my senior executives if I would consider changing my title to Chief Inclusion Officer or Chief People Officer. When I asked why I was told, "Because what you do is focused on including people of all backgrounds." I knew that wasn’t the real reason because I saw them cringe when I said the word "Diversity." Should we fight to keep Diversity in our language or should we give in to a losing battle?"

Humm, if "diversity" causes such heartburn while "inclusion" makes folks less jittery, why not just pull the plug on diversity? Good question. However, I’m not sure that a quick switch in semantics will fix something with so many emotional attachments. Let’s take a closer look at the words at stake here, diversity first, and how they’re viewed from multiple perspectives.

In an opinion held by leaders who really believe it, diversity signals a value, a moral principle and just good business practice. Generally, there’s congruence between their words and deeds. But others see it more cynically as a zero sum game, quotas (primarily racial), or "political correctness" gone amuck. And to still others, diversity is seen as personal validation, hope and a removal of barriers to opportunity. So clearly there would be consequences associated with any conscious move away from the word diversity.

Now what’s behind this so-called “diversity fatigue?” We don’t have to look too far for some culprits. For starters, we’ve allowed ourselves to slip comfortably into words and clichés that, although probably not by intent, perpetuate the cynicism.

"Diversity metrics?" "Diversity recruiting conferences?" "Diversity hires?" When we say these things are we really talking about the full realm of "diversities" (gays, introverts, religions, cultures, thought patterns, white guys, work styles, non-exempts, political ideologies, geography, etc.), or do we really mean gender and race? If you say yes to the former, there’s a 95% chance that I can sell you the Brooklyn Bridge.
Now how about "inclusion?" When I've uttered the word diversity in work I've done outside the U.S. - in places ranging from China, The Netherlands and France - the typical response is, "We don't have diversity problems in our country because we don't have any blacks or Hispanics." On the other hand, when I bring up the word "inclusion" wherever I go, heads nod and the energy level picks up noticeably. But inclusion, too, is not without its drawbacks. Here's what one person said about inclusion recently:

"Inclusion's a bunch of crap Terry! It's a smokescreen, an escape hatch for slick-talkers to duck from the unfinished business of race and gender, to own up to the glaring lack of diversity on their teams. Tell me, how on earth can you have inclusion with zero, or so little, diversity in the first place?"

So what's the answer? I think that we start by calling things what they are. If it is women, blacks and Hispanics, say that for goodness sake and stop hiding behind the word diversity. The sooner we stop with the fancy clichés the sooner we'll see drops in blood pressure at mere sightings of the word diversity. And when we do explain the focus on race and gender, as we should, it's essential to point to the gaps in the data in those areas and the competitive reasons for the need to close those gaps.

Next, we should keep stressing the fact that true "diversity" includes a full spectrum of differences, including but not just race and gender. And "inclusion?" Simply put, inclusion "is the result of a conscious effort to remove real or perceived barriers to participation and opportunities coupled with the utilization of the skills, perspectives, talents and experiences people bring to the organization."

So when we use these terms, let's say what we mean. Impressions as well as cynicism are formed by what we say and what we don't say.

Last, and in any conscious effort to make "inclusion" an add-on to "diversity," it behooves us not to make blind assumptions about what inclusion really is since it is very personal and varies from group to group, and even person to person.

I do believe that the stage is big enough to embrace diversity (and yes, with it race and gender), and certainly inclusion, without either having to exit stage left. We're not talking about an either/or here. We are talking about a peaceful co-existence of terms backed up by the right behaviors and organizational practices to achieve both diversity and inclusion.... and winning in a competitive marketplace!

Long story short, let's not waste time in pointless debates, with frantic searches for the word that will everyone feel good and semantic tap-dancing. Hey, we just don't have time for detractions from the important challenges and incredible opportunities that lie ahead.
Life is just too darn short. I’ll end with that understatement!

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