



# The **FUTURE** of **HR** It's Inextricably Bound to Inclusion

By Joanne L. Smikle, Ph.D.

**T**his article explores inclusion as a vital element of the future of the human resource profession. It addresses the practitioner and the organizational outcomes derived from progressive human capital utilization. While there is no crystal ball and predictions are futile, this article posits two positions. The first is that practitioners have a responsibility to foster inclusion. The second is that organizations have a responsibility to address the impact that larger

societal issues have on the workplace in thoughtful, systemic ways. The work of the practitioner and the organization of the future are both inextricably bound to inclusion. Rather than pontificate or stand on a soap box, this article introduces a sound theory that can be applied in practice for facing the future with optimism.

The future begins with the practitioner. The practitioner has to be brave enough to surface the tough issues of inequity and

injustice. Ignoring their existence doesn't mean that they are not present in the organization. In fact, when they are ignored for too long, turnover increases, as does overall dissatisfaction with the workplace. HR practitioners have to develop the ability to identify misalignments and incongruities in their organizations. Specifically, the misalignments and incongruities that are not supportive of an organization's public statements supporting equity and justice.



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Let me provide an example of an incongruity. A client called and asked me to do webinars with her on diversity because she felt that her industry was a model for inclusion. I highlighted the fact that her industry is notorious for occupational ghettos. That term, though it makes some uncomfortable, aptly refers to organizations that have diversity clustered in low wage, low status positions. Supervisory, management, leadership and board positions are homogenous when occupational ghettos exist.

This was the case of the industry that the client was referring to. Our interchange gave her an opportunity to reflect on the realities of inclusion in her industry. Hopefully, it moved her beyond her fantasy to what is evident to any outside observer who really grasps what organizations and industries that value diversity actually look like. That is the future of HR. Practitioners will be tasked with looking dispassionately at what is and then partnering with senior leaders on creating what will be.

Moving to the organization, no matter the industry sector, it will be important to understand social inclusion theory. In a nutshell, this theory looks to improve the ways that individuals and groups take part in society, and this includes the workplace. Social inclusion theory offers a clear framework for understanding how the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of the larger world impact how well a person is able to contribute, participate and exercise their most basic rights. While the theory is very broad, it can easily be adapted to the workplace.

What are the implications for the organization in the future? The most obvious is that climate and

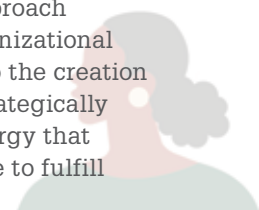
culture will have to be thoroughly analyzed so that social exclusion can be identified and eliminated. This takes tremendous fortitude on the part of senior leaders. It requires the willingness to deeply explore the nuances of organizational climate and culture. It goes further to identify how those nuances impact individual contributors.

As HR practitioners work to move the organization towards inclusion, partnerships are necessary. This means creating trusting relationships with senior executives and other stakeholders. The partners can work together to use a systems approach to delve deeply into the core of the organization. This means not jumping to quick, short-sighted solutions like diversity training or whatever the next fad is for addressing inclusion. If this partnership becomes viable, it can move the organization along the path of its most powerful, positive potential. This will favorably impact all facets of human capital utilization to include pipeline planning, performance measurement, performance management, retention strategies and related activities.

You may be asking why it is important that both HR practitioners and the organizations that they serve are focused on substantive inclusion in the future. Surely, these are not new concepts. They are resurgences of unresolved issues that have festered in the workplace and in the larger world. In the 1960s, Price Cobbs, MD and William Grier addressed the dimensions of Black life in America in their seminal work, *Black Rage*. Roosevelt Thomas, a protégé of Cobbs, moved the thinking further into workplace practice in the 1980's with *Beyond Race & Gender*:

Unleashing the Power of Your Total Workforce by Managing Diversity. His contention was that wise organizations would address their systems and create a culture that embraced inclusion. And here we are in 2020 with organizations in every sector still looking for actionable strategies for bringing people together to forge common bonds and move the enterprise forward.

In summary, the future of HR and the future of the organization are inextricably bound to equity, justice, inclusion and, ultimately, peace. Social inclusion theory advises that the political and social climate, the larger culture, and the economy are all present in the workplace. It is important for HR practitioners and executives to assess the climate and culture of the organization to determine the impact of those factors. Forming a partnership to better understand what is going on below the surface in the organization will enable the formulation of thoughtful approaches to maximize the utilization of all human capital. This collaborative approach between HR and organizational leadership will lead to the creation of a framework for strategically directing positive energy that enables the enterprise to fulfill its mission. ■



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