

It's All About the Words Redefining Diversity

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Whoever said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” didn’t know what they were talking about.

Our words contain enormous power—power to heal and power to harm. Words matter. Think about it. Through the ages, words have built societies, destroyed nations, defined cultures, and started wars. It’s words that describe how we feel, bringing dimension to what we think. Words have built up, but they have also torn down. Words matter a great deal, and the man or woman who can choose just the right word at just the right time has a skill greatly desired by others. There’s even an ancient proverb that says, “Like apples of gold in a setting of silver is a word appropriately spoken” (Proverbs 25:11, CJB).

It’s all about the words you use, what you mean by those words, and why you chose those particular words in the first place. It’s about how you say what you want to say and even when you decide to say it. What does the word mean? What did it previously mean? What might it mean going forward? Definitions can be all over the map. Our logical starting place is to spend some time taking a closer look at the meanings of the terms we are using. Socrates even said it this way, “The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.”

The first step toward lasting change is to look closely at the language. We believe there’s a need to use words that propel us toward unity. Words like diversity, equity, and inclusion are good, but they fall short in describing the change we want to see to get results. They may be suitable as a starting place but not as a route to lasting change. In our view, the words commonality, equality, and cohesion do a much better job in describing this change, and we’re eager to show you why we believe that. We want to take some time to explore the definitions of these six words: diversity, commonality, equity, equality, inclusion, and cohesion. That way you’ll be able to make up your own mind about which words seem to create the energy and set goals that fit best for you.

We’re more convinced than ever that commonality, equality, and cohesion are the better terms to energize your company, and we’re going to explain why we believe that to be true.

We believe that commonality, equality, and cohesion (CEC) effectively raises the bar for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Having said that, we both want to make sure you know that we are not down on or in any way against the original unifying goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are contrasting the terms to purposefully clarify the potential outcomes of using these terms in the workplace. Which terms are likely to be better to cause the behavioral changes we want to see and drive the performance we want to achieve? Like we’ve said, DEI has served well as a good starting place. But we’re interested in raising the bar.

We think we can do better. And the way we get started is by choosing better terminology.

DIVERSITY DEFINED

All right, so let’s get into the details. Which word works better, diversity or commonality? We like the word diversity, and we understand the historical reason for the term and the goals associated with it; we just don’t think it’s enough to get us to where we want to go. Merriam-Webster defines diversity as “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements, the state of being diverse.” The dictionary goes on to list some synonyms like variety, assortment, a mixed bag.

Again, we believe that diversity is a good thing. It’s good to have diversity, to have variety, to have an assortment. But isn’t there more to it than that? Is it just about having the right folks at the table? Certainly, that’s the first step, but that can’t be our end goal. Just having a variety of people around the table doesn’t get you near where you want to be. You haven’t done anything yet. You’re just at

the starting point.

Put another way, diversity isn't a high enough goal. Have you ever set a low goal but ended up missing it anyway? In that event, what have you accomplished? Not very much. But what if you missed a much higher goal? In that case, even though you fell short, you still achieved quite a bit. That's what we're advocating here. We think diversity by itself is too low of a goal. Diversity, by definition, is only focused on the static condition

of being different and encouraging the desire to have a wide variety of people working together. This is a good start, but a higher goal is needed to create a true team environment. Do we believe in diversity? Absolutely! We believe in 100% diversity. All of us are different, unique individuals with our own set of traits, beliefs, tendencies, and preferences. Even in identical twins, the differences can be staggering. They may look alike on the outside, but they are two completely different human beings inside—diversity. Certainly, differences are even wider and more pronounced when people come from different cultures and backgrounds. The broader the diversity, the more important and necessary it is to introduce commonality.

COMMONALITY DEFINED

Now let's take a closer look at the word commonality and what it means. The dictionary defines commonality as "A feature or purpose that is shared by two or more people or things. The fact of shared interest, experiences or other characteristics with someone or something." We like that. When you start seeing words like purpose and shared, it sounds much more like a higher calling, a much stronger word than just diversity. Now let's look at some of the synonyms of commonality: common denominator, congruity, similarity, equal, parallel, resemblance. From the definition and synonyms, it's plain to see that commonality is focused on a shared purpose that extends beyond our differences.

Now we're getting somewhere! If we can see and understand and appreciate each other's differences (diversity) but go beyond that to discover a shared purpose (commonality) that extends beyond our differences, now we've genuinely got something. Now we have a team.

Now we have two sides of a coin; a whole that has real potential.

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Once we found the definitions and synonyms, we also looked at some examples of how to use the words in a sentence.

We uncovered another interesting layer of meaning for us to consider. One of the dictionaries used the word commonality in this sentence: “They found a commonality in discussing their experiences.” Read that again. Using the word in that context, you’d conclude that at least one of the purposes of exploring our differences is to find commonality, to see where our different experiences have led to the same conclusion or led to the same understanding.

Diversity is about determining and even highlighting our differences, but commonality is about taking the next step, reaching deeper for a point of understanding. We can’t just settle for talking differences, differences, differences and think we’re going to get anywhere. There must be a desire to come together to discover experiences that we all share. That’s commonality, and that’s what makes it a much more powerful word to describe where we want to end up than just diversity alone. When we experience commonality, empathy is naturally introduced. When we all get to know each other and find out what we have in common, we develop care and concern for one another.

That’s how it is supposed to work. The more you know about somebody, the more you can

walk in their shoes a little bit, and the more you can see what’s going on in their lives. That’s when care and concern are a natural outcome. Another dictionary we looked at gave this example: “There are some commonalities between the different stories.” So commonality builds upon the differences; it doesn’t ignore them or set them aside or pretend they’re not there. Commonality is all about building upon and going beyond our differences, which ultimately affects our attitudes and behaviors. And it’s our attitude toward each other and how we behave toward one another that gets us where we want to go, on our way toward lasting change. AQ

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