

Justspeak: Eliminating the Rolodex of inequality

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor
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At a recent networking event for women in Raleigh, I listened as a panel of experienced women executives shared their experiences with the audience. One question posed was about how non-profit and corporate board members were recruited. One response stood out in my mind. The speaker indicated that she often recruited board members by tapping into her friends and colleagues. The answer affirmed a thesis of mine—there exists in our society what I call the “rolodex of inequality,” and what it produces is homogeneity or sameness.

I do not throw terms like inequality around easily. It is my area of study as an anthropologist. My research over the last two decades has critically examined the cultural and structural forces that consistently and systematically disadvantage particular groups and the individuals who comprise the group. Think about the historic inequality that people of African descent face globally as individuals and as members of a group—high unemployment, lower levels of education, lower levels of wealth, to name a few. Think about the historic inequality that women have faced as individuals and as members of a group—unequal pay for the same jobs, requiring legislation to exercise choice over their bodies, and medical beliefs that historically minimize women’s illnesses. And, these conditions for both groups occur in the United States and globally.

My argument that such a phenomenon as a “Rolodex of Inequality” exists is rooted in my research, direct observations, and personal and professional experiences from the last thirty years while working in the higher education, not-for-profit, and philanthropy sectors.

Who’s in your Rolodex?

There is a startling reality of privilege and unequal access embedded in the statement friends and colleagues are the recruitment pool for members of a board. But, if we examine some of the most influential organizations, whether political, social, or philanthropic, the truth of this practice is self-evident. Board compositions too often reflect the realities of personal or social Rolodexes. And these Rolodexes are at the heart of contemporary social inequality. At the most simplistic level, this means that only the people with whom the individual is comfortable, or who are friends of friends form the talent pool. Thus, most of those sitting on boards today share similar values, economic status, social experiences, social identities, and worldviews.

While this social structure might be comforting to some, it does come with a downside that hinges on Einstein’s definition of insanity—keep doing the same thing and expecting different

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outcomes. The same is true of organizational composition. If you keep recruiting the same kind of people, it will be impossible to achieve a different outcome.

Those Boards that have come to recognize such organizational stasis get stuck when it comes to recruiting diversity. This is primarily because they are relying upon old paradigms, their Rolodexes of Inequality, and traditional definitions of “fit” that simply don’t fit potential new and diverse recruits.

In the past, we referred to the Rolodex of Inequality as the “ole boys network.” Far too frequently, embedded was another silent descriptor—the “ole (white) boys network.” While increasingly we find more women represented in the leadership of organizations and businesses, too often they reproduce the same missteps of their male counterparts. In effect, through feminism and affirmative action, today we see an “ole (white) girls network” that is as powerful and as lacking in racial and class diversity as the paradigmatic “ole boys network.”

Paradigm Shift

Most processes of social change that have occurred in those cultures studied by anthropologists have required the existence of two types of people—“cultural brokers” and “innovators.” The first are people skilled at providing translations between old formations and new diverse formations. Innovators, however, are paradigm breakers. They are quite prepared to shake things up and toss out the bathwater and the baby (not literally of course) in the hopes of establishing new models. They begin by imagining what the future should look like and then working backwards to create organizational structures that will help them achieve the goal. To the outside eye, the innovator’s approach may appear chaotic and is certainly a challenge to those who like (and benefit from) maintaining the status quo. But such a radical approach is the only way to jumpstart change.

If we only reach into our personal Rolodex, we sustain an environment of inequality. My advice is to take a stark and honest look at your Board composition, your business, your organization, and your social network. How much “difference” and “diversity” do they truly reflect? And, if you want to shake it up and move in a different direction, then stop using your own Rolodex.

One principle that Darwin documented in writing about evolution in the biological world was the need for variation. The same is true for the social world. If we wish to innovate and evolve to a different stage or phase, then variation is fundamental, and new paradigms are needed—of course, as these out serve their purpose, they will have to be replaced as well, but that’s for future generations to worry about.