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Why is it so difficult to have discussions of equity and excellence?

Most people don't necessarily put them together. It's difficult because most people separate the two. It's generally easier for people to talk about excellence, because they talk about quality, they talk about the skills of teachers and classrooms. They have a more difficult time talking about outcomes for students, what an excellent school or an excellent classroom would produce in terms of outcomes. But I think people have an easier time talking about excellence. The notion of excellence isn't as threatening to people as the notion of equity.

I think people have a difficult time talking about equity for a number of reasons. One is that the notion of equity flies in the face of our capitalistic society. Our society socializes people to get everything they can get for themselves. It's not about being your brother's keeper or creating wealth or success or happiness for society. It's about creating it for you, individually, and your family. But in terms of creating equity for all, that is not something we're socialized to think about. That's not a part of most people's conversation when they're talking with their children. It's definitely not part of the workforce, creating equity for all. It's about doing the best you get do individually and getting promoted and getting everything you can get.

The other major issue around the difficulty of discussing equity is that it's an issue of power: power and resources and money. For people to discuss equity, or to look at the issue of equity, people have to suspend their own belief in individual gain over collective gain and the power that's associated with it. So those who are in power and make decisions would have to give something up. And again, that flies in the face of our capitalistic society.

So capitalism and power, individualism and power, are two things that people would have to look at giving up if they're really going to have a deep conversation about equity, And that's not comfortable for people. They don't want to do that.

People think they are losing, when you talk about equity. People think that, if things were equitable, those who had power and influence believe that they would be losing something if things were equitable. And they don't want to lose anything.

Once you've decided that that's what you want to talk about, how do you get started?

One way to get started is to have people create a definition of equity and have them look at what does equity mean, outside of themselves, to make it fairly objective around that issue of equity. And once people begin to think about what that is, you can begin to approach the conversation around what that means. Starting with what that means, people individualize and feel that loss.

Keep it depersonalized, initially, because I think the personalization of it is what frightens people because they begin to perceive things in terms of a loss.

If you can get people to link it with excellence, and have them think of them as coexisting, as codependent, and approach it through an excellence lens, I think that also would allow people to start that conversation more easily. What it means about personalization is the second phase of that, but I think you have to keep it objective first. I think that's the second step. Begin to think about, what is equity, let's talk about what that is. Then move into, how have you experienced equity or inequity. I just think the concept needs to be developed objectively first and then personalize it.

Once you've started, how do you organize a conversation so people learn things and build on what they know?

That's where I think the experience comes in. As people begin to discuss their experiences around equity and inequity, that's why I think you need the concept first. What are the positive and negative experiences related to the concept of equity that you have identified? And then move people into a conversation around, how do you maximize the positive experiences that we would consider equitable, and how do we minimize or eliminate the possibility of experiences that we have said are negative in terms of inequity.

So if I have experienced X, and it was a wonderful experience that I would relate to the concept of equity and excellence, then what do we do to generalize those experiences and make them more accessible to people? And once we have identified what we would term inequitable experiences, what are the things that we can do to limit those inequitable experiences.

That's how we move those conversations forward. But ground those conversations in the concept of what equity is, in personal experiences, and then begin to look at "force-field" analysis of those: how do we minimize the negative processes that create those experiences, and how do we maximize the positive. I see those three steps fairly sequentially. They may overlap. To reiterate: what is it, conceptually; what are your experiences, personally; and how do we minimize and maximize.

One of the things we saw at the Forum is that once people started the conversation, it started to grow and involve all the inequities there are in society. Because there are so many, the discussion got very expansive. People wanted to take on the whole world. How do you place some boundaries on the issue so that people can focus on what they can affect?

It's such a huge issue, and there is so much. I agree. We look at it so globally that we actually cripple ourselves. I think people begin to look at activities before looking at the results that they're looking for. That's where the excellence piece comes in. So instead of saying, let's take on the world and do X, Y, and Z, I do believe that in that three-step process that I just outlined, somewhere in there we need to say these are the results that

we are looking for, and if we have these results, then we would have achieved equity, through that lens of identifying what excellence looks like.

So if we're talking about our educational system, we all need to identify where we individually can have some type of influence and where our coordination of efforts can have even more influence. So if I'm in a particular organization, we need to look at our sphere of influence around this issue and begin to outline where we can create a difference. And initially, not think about moving outside of that. We need to identify our sphere. Maybe other organizations we can work with that have a different sphere of influence. That's the way you enlarge it, working cooperatively with other organizations or other entities, looking at your spheres of influence and seeing where you have some leverage.

When I think about myself and Linda, when we partner together, we can't go out and change George Bush's administration. But we can help people have a deeper conversation about this, when we have the support of someone like Annenberg and Carnegie to convene this. That's our sphere of influence. I'm not going to run to Washington and try to get an audience with George Bush. And I'm not going to run to New Orleans and try to tell them what to do. My sphere of influence is what you were able to see last month in that forum. That's where I believe I can have a positive impact, even if that impact is simply getting people to think more deeply about equity and excellence. And I can help create models for them to ground their thoughts and experiences in.

If I can think of a process to help guide people through this, it's helping people identify what they mean by equity, through an excellence lens; having people talk about experiences; revisiting that equity and excellence lens in terms of outcomes that we would like to see; looking at what are our spheres of influence; and looking at how we minimize the negative impact in this sphere and how we maximize the positive impact.

In terms of moving to action, we need to be very realistic about where we influence. And what we can do, and what partnerships or alliances or cooperatives we can create to enlarge those spheres of influence or combine spheres of influence to make a difference.

How do you move from discussion to action?

Getting people to move from talk to actually behaving differently is probably the most difficult piece. Getting people to behave differently goes back to that whole concept of capitalism, even if it's not around money. I think people need to create some intrinsic or extrinsic rewards. I don't mean money, etc., but people tend to move when there's something in it for them.

How do you create value for my behavioral change? That value may simply be the intrinsic feeling that I did something wonderful. So help people identify for themselves what's the value that you can get out of doing this. What would you like to see? If you're going to do something differently, what is it going to take? Have people identify those

things: why is it worth it for you to do the things you are doing? Have them truly look at their own understanding of their internal reward system.

This is where values clarification and beliefs come in. Somewhere in there you need to begin to look at those issues—your values and beliefs. If your behavior needs to move from X to Z, what is the value that will, first of all, drive that behavioral change, and second of all, to sustain that behavior or continue to move along that continuum?

So I think the issue is around those values. Why am I doing this? What's in it for me? Our society does not create many totally altruistic people—"I'm just doing this for the good of society." There are those, but in our society people have to make a living, and people have to take care of families, and people have obligations. So getting people to do something differently without jeopardizing those low-level and high-level hierarchical needs that Maslow has outlined, how do you fit changes into some of those, and what value does it bring?

As you know, we've had many, many conversations around things, and when the conversations are over, people go back to business as usual.

Another is around the environment. Individually, for me, I may say this is valuable for me to do, and it creates some type of intrinsic reward, but when I go back to the environment where I do my work, that environment doesn't support the behavioral changes that I am trying to exhibit. So therefore, it will not allow me to be successful. Then, we need to look at how we can influence the environment and really engage people in that conversation also. Have people investigate, what things can you change in your environment to help support you and actually reward you for this behavioral change?

So it's two-fold: one, our values and beliefs, and how this contributes to our values; and two, how do we influence the environment within which we exist most of the time to actually support and reward this behavioral change?

I believe the wisdom about these issues lies within the individuals. It's not that I myself or Linda can come in and tell people, here's what you need to do when you go back to your work site or your organization or your school or your district or whatever. I believe they have that knowledge. Our skill is asking the right questions to uncover, have that knowledge emerge from within them. They have it; they just haven't been asked the right questions to bring it out.

I don't think a conversation around this will be useful without having people investigate their personal experiences around it. Where Linda and I might differ a little is in sequence. I think the step prior to having people do this is having people be clear what we are talking about. But then I think the next step is definitely necessary, that people begin to investigate their own personal experiences around that concept of equity and excellence that they already identified.

Let me give you an example about the issue of loss. When I first went to the Gates Foundation, and Bill Gates created the Gates Millennium Scholarship, which was a \$1 billion scholarship--\$50 million a year for twenty years—targeted to African American, Native American, Asian American, and Hispanic American students, there were literally groups of attorneys trying to sue Bill Gates to keep him from doing that, because there was a perception of loss within the white community around this money. It was not theirs in the first place; it was Bill Gates' money, and he could do whatever he wanted to do with it. I had several people come up to me, literally, and say to me, “why is he taking this money from my children?” Part of my response was, “It wasn't your money or your children's money in the first place. It's his money. He can give it the way he wants. He's not taking it from anyone.”

But that whole issue of trying to create equity, those who have been privileged, those who have power, those who have influence, the whole notion of equity creates the feeling within them that something is being taken away. Not that something is being added to help others. It's literally being taken away from them. That's one of the reasons it's so difficult to have this conversation.

You'll notice that most of the time the conversations are held by those who have been treated inequitably, not those who have been privileged throughout their lives. Those are the people we need to engage in this, so that they can begin to understand the issue of inequity. It's very foreign to them.