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Indifference to Cultural Inclusion: Not an Option in the U.S. Environmental Movement

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Indifference to Cultural Inclusion: Not an Option in the U.S. Environmental Movement

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SUMMARY

This chapter addresses the need for building the pipeline of talent in the environmental movement. It speaks to the business case, the value of inclusion and the growing clout of diverse people. If the environmental movement is to truly speak to the needs of the global community, it will need to understand the values, interests and cultural mores of diverse peoples.

The chapter explores issues, concerns and opportunities revolving around two paramount questions: “Can the environmental movement be successful if its constituents and leaders are indifferent to diversity and inclusion?” and “What are the risks and the potential rewards of modeling inclusive behavior?”

KEY WORDS

Diversity, inclusion, environmental movement, workforce representation, affirmative action, outreach, supplier diversity, business case, business imperative for diversity, respectful work environment, employer of choice

In August 2005, while witnessing the unprecedented horror of Hurricane Katrina, I saw a young African-American boy on national television speaking about the impact of the hurricane on his family and community. You could sense the hopelessness and despair in his voice as he posed the question: “*What is we gonna do?*”

Implicit in his questioning was a call to all of us, black and white, brown and yellow, to come together in building strategies to overcome the forces of nature and the brunt of this hurricane’s destruction.

Since that time, we have witnessed the impact of the ravages of wind and rain, and have seen how the chill of the air can devastate a crop of oranges, lemons and strawberries in the verdant green fields of California. We can sense the urgency of the farmers and the crews of Latino migrant workers scurrying to save what little food is left.

The irony of the loss is not in just the food supply killed by nature, but the livelihood robbed from many Latino laborers. While many of the poor and disenfranchised workers will bear much of the cost of this disaster in lost wages and harder living conditions, many of the more affluent residents of the state will not really feel the impact. The Latino community in the end is more significantly impacted. I am reminded of that haunting cry of the young African-American boy, “*What is we gonna do?*”

As nature continues to exact a mounting toll, it appears that people of color, the poor and the disenfranchised bear a significant part of the burden. It is not just an issue confined to the shores of the United States; it is a global issue.

There is a strategic imperative in the environmental movement for greater diversity and inclusion. The business case is very clear:

- Diversity trumps homogeneity in developing creative solutions to environmental issues.
- Diverse champions are needed to garner support from constituent groups.
- Implementation of new initiatives will require new voices from these “diverse communities” that are impacted by proposed change.
- The environmental mindset must shift to thinking of these diverse communities as customers. As such they should seek to understand their beliefs, values and history and integrate them into the strategy.

- Civil and governmental leadership in many communities, especially urban centers, has become more diverse. As a result, the issuance of new policies, mandates, and regulatory licenses will be decided by these policymakers. Not fully understanding and embracing the diversity of local leadership will make implementation more difficult.

The environmental movement is still perceived as a white, upper middle class movement, with very little involvement of minority groups. It appears that the movement continues to be indifferent to the need to be more inclusive and diverse. The movement must address that fundamental concern.

CAN THE MOVEMENT SURVIVE IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF INDIFFERENCE?

As I reflect on the challenges that these environmental disasters present, I wonder who is helping to solve the issues, to explore creative solutions, and to measure the impact on the communities and geographical areas affected. Are the policy makers and strategists reflective of these diverse communities? Is diversity a consideration? Does it make a difference? Are our universities producing graduates in the environmental field that reflect the diversity of these societies who can help? Problems occurring in communities that bear the brunt of the catastrophe can not be effectively solved without the engagement and participation of their people. To enhance the decision-making process, these communities need more representation in academic programs related to environmental science. The movement cannot continue to be indifferent about diversity in local community decision-making, education and employment. Indifference is not a suitable response if the movement expects to survive.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel articulated the concerns regarding indifference in a White House speech, titled *The Perils of Indifference*. He explained that:

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor – never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political

prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees – not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own. Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment.¹

If we are to explore the impact of environmental change on the lives of people, we cannot do it without understanding and appreciating the values and the cultures of the people impacted. We cannot be indifferent to their mores and cultural traditions.

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Instilling the values of the movement begins in the schools and with children in these diverse communities. Mr. Wiesel went a bit further in his essay to write:

What about the children? Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart. Their fate is always the most tragic, inevitably. When adults wage war, children perish. We see their faces, their eyes. Do we hear their pleas? Do we feel their pain, their agony? Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, famine. Some of them – so many of them – could be saved.²

So I come back again to the voice of the young African-American boy as he laments: “*What is we gonna do?*”

¹ Wiesel, Elie. *The Perils of Indifference*. White House Millennium Lecture Series. April 12, 1999.

² *Ibid.*

HOW SHOULD GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES BE ADDRESSED?

The question posed by this unassuming young boy is against a backdrop of significant global environmental challenges including climate change, global warming, worsening air quality, extreme weather changes and increasingly fragile ecosystems.

These changes are impacting every strata of our global society. We cannot adequately address the ramifications of these changes without the collective efforts of leaders from our diverse communities around the world. Consider the impact, the lasting imprint, and the environmental context that Katrina has left on the souls of the people of New Orleans. The soul of this young boy has been indelibly changed. He, like countless others from disenfranchised and neglected communities around the world, are symbolic of the type of diverse input needed in deciding what and how to address environmental issues.

Perhaps the answers will come from a new generation of diverse children who will swiftly usher in a new era of leadership in the environmental movement like the winds of El Niño. El Niño is Spanish for *The Little Boy*. It refers to the Christ child and was named by a Mexican fisherman, who noticed that the climate pattern often formed around Christmas time. We are seeing the impact of El Niño these days. It is symbolic of the swiftness of change needed in the environmental movement, like some of the physical results it is exacting on modern day society.

The significant environmental changes related to El Niño are impacting our health with an increased incidence of illnesses such as asthma. They are also creating extreme weather conditions such as hurricanes, tornadoes and heat waves.

These changing weather patterns, including other major natural disasters, are having a devastating impact on the global economy in areas such as significant crop loss, the destruction of property and loss of fish/seafood revenues. They are also impacting the fragile ecosystems in wine producing areas, coral reefs and natural streams and rivers.

Perhaps this little boy who asked “*What is we gonna do?*” is a modern-day prophet serving notice to an indifferent world. The environmental movement must usher in a new generation of

visionary leaders much like the way El Niño brings dramatic change to unsuspecting communities. Racial and ethnic diversity is a cornerstone of the movement's future.

RACE AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Race and class have factored into the environmental debate for years. Whether it is the siting of freeways, factories or new communities, those in lower income areas that are generally racial minorities are those most negatively affected by the environmental consequences of these actions. Impacts include noise, water and air pollution, aesthetics and physical and economic dislocation. The environmental movement has played a key role in inspiring the development community to become aware of, and to address the human health aspects of actions that impact the environment.

On the other hand the economic benefits of this development have been important to the very people who are potentially impacted. The environmental movement can do a better job of understanding the balance between good environmental performance, good economic performance and the needs of those people most affected. In turn, the development and environmental communities can do a better job of including the people most affected by such decisions. That is the win-win for environmental progress.

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE, TRADITION AND LEGACY ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Several years ago I had the distinct pleasure to sit with a group of Cree Tribal Leaders in the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada. I was educated on a few of the values and beliefs of this great people.

As I witnessed a tribal dance and heard the participants chant "Wake up, the birds still sing," I came to appreciate the values that many native people have for their heritage and legacy. I also learned to understand their deep and abiding love for the land, the products of the land, and all of the Creator's animals. My newfound learning and appreciation caused me to reflect on why diversity in all facets of the environmental movement is important.

There is a deep love and appreciation for nature and the world we live in shared by people around the world. In many communities they

hold the forests, the animals, and other natural wonders sacred. Leaders in the environmental movement and industry cannot create lasting change and solutions to growing problems without understanding the legends and stories that guide the daily lives of many types of people. Nor can they do it with an attitude of indifference and disrespect for their cultural traditions and heritage.

If the environmental movement is to create lasting and sustainable change leading to healthier communities, cleaner air and safer living environments, the international context for social responsibility and action must be understood. The framework adopted by the United Nations in 2005 underscores the need to embrace and value different cultural expressions, especially in the environmental movement.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT ESTABLISHED BY UNESCO³

In October of 2005 the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), meeting in Paris, developed a document entitled *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* affirming that diversity is a defining characteristic of humanity. They explained that:

. . . cultural diversity creates a rich and varied world, which increases the range of choices and nurtures human capacities and values, and therefore is a mainspring for sustainable development for communities, peoples and nations.

The main objective of the Convention is to create, in the context of an increasingly interconnected world, an enabling environment in which all cultural expressions may be affirmed in their rich creative diversity, renewed through exchanges and partnerships, and made accessible to all for the benefit of humanity. In doing so, the Convention provides an innovative platform for international cultural cooperation, with particular emphasis on developing countries, and it reaffirms the ties that bind culture and development to foster mutual understanding and dialogue between peoples.⁴

³ General Conference of the United Nations. October 2005. Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression. Information available at: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

⁴ Ibid.

At the meeting, UNESCO developed eight guiding principles:

1. Principle of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.
2. Principle of sovereignty.
3. Principle of equal dignity of and respect for all cultures.
4. Principle of international solidarity and cooperation.
5. Principle of complementarity of economic and cultural aspects of development.
6. Principle of sustainable development.
7. Principle of equitable access.
8. Principle of openness and balance.

These eight principles underscore the importance of diversity and of cultural expression. They also set the global context for action.

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The associated discussions between world leaders reinforce our global connectedness, respect for diverse people that clearly demonstrate an alignment with cooperative undertaking, and sharing between people around the world.

Perhaps the answer to the young African-American boy's lament lies in the words and principles crafted by this organization. UNESCO's actions do not suggest indifference, but a healthy respect

for diverse sets of values and backgrounds and an appreciation of different perspectives.

THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT IS A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

The growing changes and the devastation in recent years as a result of natural disasters have to be fully considered and understood in the context of society, values, legend and history.

One cannot assume that everyone shares the same perspective about nature, ecosystems or scientific concepts like global warming. We need to understand the perspectives of diverse communities if the movement expects full participation by all segments of our global society.

Even in the United States, we are seeing the growing connection between economic, cultural and environmental endeavors. Our fate, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, is inextricably bound in each other's fate. We must have an inclusive, global strategy if we are to succeed. If we are not inclusive, our strategies and policies will fail.

An accelerating convergence between the economic and the cultural is currently occurring in modern life and is bringing in its train new kinds of urban and regional outcomes and opening up new opportunities for policy makers to raise local levels of income, employment, and social well-being.⁵

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STRATEGY, POLICY, AND ACTIONS SHOULD BE BASED ON DIVERSE INPUT

If the actions and strategies of the environmental movement are to hold up over time, they should incorporate ideas from representatives of diverse communities. Actions and strategies should be crafted in

⁵ Scott, Allen J. Cultural Products, Industries and Urban Economic Development, *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol 39, No. 4, March 2004: 461-490.

such a way as to not negatively impact the people in societies and geographies worldwide. Indigenous people from communities around the world want, and expect to play, an increasingly pivotal role in decisions affecting their communities. Therefore, environmental leaders must proactively seek their input and opinions about proposed policies and regulations.

A company's license to operate in these communities will be determined by how they engage, respect, and value the opinions and desires of the community impacted.

Corporations are keen to avoid interference in their business through taxation or regulations. By taking substantive voluntary steps they can persuade governments and the wider public that they are taking current issues like health and safety, diversity or the environment seriously and so avoid intervention. This also applies to firms seeking to justify eye-catching profits and high levels of boardroom pay. Those operating away from their home country can make sure they stay welcome by being good corporate citizens with respect to labour standards and impacts on the environment.⁶

An inclusive strategy insures that the desires and interests of the broader community are a key part of the decision-making process. This approach builds in processes for gathering input and feedback on emerging strategic direction and initiatives. Failure to engage the community in meaningful dialogue and discussion can make implementation of any new initiative much more difficult and more likely to stall.

Put simply, the variety of ideologies and organizational structures of groups within the movement make the environmental movement difficult to suppress. The diversity of organizations affords maximum penetration of and recruitment from different socioeconomic and sub-cultural groups, contributes to a system of reliability through redundancy, duplication, and overlap, maximizes adaptive variation through diversity of participants and purposes, and encourages social innovation and problem solving.⁷

⁶ Wikipedia – Corporate Social Responsibility. www.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Corporate_social_responsibility. Accessed from the World Wide Web February 2007.

⁷ Silveira, Stacy. *The American Environmental Movement: Surviving Through Diversity*, *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review*. Winter 2001.

There is a growing connection between the environmental, the civil rights and the human rights movements. This connection is strengthening the output of each movement. This interconnectedness can be seen in the five pillars of human rights: housing, employment, health, environment and economic development. None can be fully assessed or develop strategies without a careful consideration and application of diversity lenses. These movements are beginning to realize that they will be unable to fulfill their vision and ultimate potential without a healthy appreciation and respect for diversity.

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SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IS A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE FOR CORPORATE AMERICA

According to David Crowther and Lez Rayman-Bacchus, corporate social responsibility is concerned with what is or should be the relationship between the global corporation, governments of countries and individual citizens. More locally, the definition is concerned with the relationship between a corporation and the local society in which it operates.⁸ This growing relationship between a company, government and community suggests a growing focus on social responsibility and stewardship.

Corporations cannot sit on the sideline and assume that they have no role in the efforts in environmental or social efforts or causes. Consider this fact: Fifty-one of the one hundred largest economies in

⁸ David Crowther and Lez Rayman-Bacchus. 2004. *Perspectives on Corporate Social Responsibility*, Chapter 1, Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

the world are now corporations, not nations. The astonishing increase in size and global scope of a few key companies defines our world. Three hundred billion dollar entities with businesses in at least 150 countries each are no longer rare. Corporate Social Responsibility is closely linked to the principles of sustainable development, which argue that enterprises should be obliged to make decisions based on financial/economic factors (e.g. profits, return on investment, dividend payments, etc.) as well as on the social, environmental and other consequences of their activities.

There is a role for businesses and corporations and they must carefully craft strategies for what “they are going to do.” Bruce Piasecki, in his newly released book, *World Inc*, talks about the growing importance of corporate social responsibility. He points out that this focus is an important consideration in doing business. Increasingly, shareholders, boards of directors, and consumers are placing greater demands on corporations to operate more ethically and with a greater appreciation of the environment and the planet in their methods of operations. Careful consideration of a company’s impact on the environment and society is becoming a matter of its long term sustainability. Bruce Piasecki, in his reference to social response capitalism, says:

Social response, the new differentiator between companies that will thrive and those that will wither, involves corporations developing from within, on their own, and for their own, a new core of product knowledge and social vision.⁹

DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is a collection of methods intended to create and sustain development that seeks to relieve poverty, create equitable standards of living, satisfy the basic needs of all peoples, produce sustainable economic growth and establish sustainable political practices. It also insures that steps are taken to avoid irreversible damages to natural capital in the long term in return for short-term benefits. The field of sustainable development can be conceptually

⁹ Piasecki, Bruce. 2007. *World Inc.: How the Growing Power of Business is Revolutionizing Profits, People and Future of Both*. Chapter Two, The Panic and Resource of Corporate Leaders. Sourcebooks.

broken into four constituent parts: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, social sustainability and political sustainability. Political and social sustainability cannot be considered without examining the role of diversity and inclusion in these areas.

Today's heightened interest in the role of businesses in society has been promoted by increased sensitivity to and awareness of environmental and ethical issues. Issues like environmental damage, improper treatment of workers and faulty production that inconveniences or endangers customers are highlighted in the media and taken seriously by consumers.

In many countries, government regulation regarding environmental and social issues has become more stringent. Additionally, standards and laws are often set at a supranational level (e.g., by the European Union). Increasingly, investors and investment fund managers are taking Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies into account when making investment decisions. This is classified as ethical investing.

Many consumers have become increasingly sensitive to the CSR performance of the companies from which they buy their goods and services. These trends have contributed to the pressure on companies to operate in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way.

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) aims to make reporting on economic, environmental, and social performance – sustainability reporting – by all organizations as routine and comparable as financial reporting. To achieve this, the GRI develops, continuously improves and builds capacity around the use of the GRI's Sustainability Reporting Framework. The core of their work revolves around establishing the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines.

This reporting guidance – in the form of principles and indicators – is provided as a free public service and is intended for voluntary use by organizations of all sizes, across all sectors, all around the world.

BUSINESS, COMMUNITY, GOVERNMENT

Solving the emerging issues of our time cannot be done in an exclusive environment. Representatives from private industry, the communities impacted, and the government must work collaboratively if sustainable solutions are to be found.

Within each of these sectors, creative solutions can be optimized if a diverse group is employed to solve the issues. Scott Page, a professor at the University of Michigan, in his book *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, reaffirms the importance of diversity in creative problem-solving, innovation and idea generation. He points out that groups of diverse problem-solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers.¹⁰

If we are to solve environmental issues in a way that optimizes the results, we must insure that we have diverse groups engaged in the problem-solving process and that these teams also represent diversity across sectors.

BUSINESS CASE AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSION

In private industry a strategic framework for diversity is emerging which is helping to guide diversity efforts. This framework is grounded in a strategic business case which clearly identifies the business imperative for change.

Here are some elements of the business imperative:

- **First, diversity and inclusion is a fundamental part of what people value within corporations.** If we are to fully engage and motivate talent, it cannot be done without a fundamental understanding of difference and the cultural traditions of the diverse population employed.
- **Secondly, customers and consumers are becoming more demanding.** They expect the producers of products targeted at their communities to have workforces that mirror those represented in the community. We are seeing increased advocacy by civil rights groups concerned about the representation of women and people of color in businesses that have located, or are seeking to locate, in their communities.
- **Thirdly, the government, as a watch-dog agency, expects corporate America to be fair in its employment policies and practices.** It has developed processes and inspection systems to ferret out bias, and can impose significant fines and penalties that can have a very significant impact on

¹⁰ Page, Scott. 2007. *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, Princeton University Press.

shareholder value, reputation and image as an employer of choice. There is growing collaboration of diversity, affirmative action and human rights advocates around the globe.

- **Fourth, talent pools, particularly for hard-to-fill and technically oriented positions, are shrinking, and the talent available is increasingly diverse.** In a talent-short employment era, options become more readily available to diverse talent, and retention becomes a more significant issue for organizations.
- **Fifth, investors and shareholders are becoming more concerned when companies do not have diverse boards and senior management leaders.** Many investors are requesting detailed information on the demographic make-up of the companies in their portfolios. Many believe that more diverse boards and senior management teams outperform less diverse companies.
- **Sixth and finally, diverse workforces and teams have greater levels of productivity, creativity and engagement.**

Diversity is drawing upon, valuing and respecting the unique characteristics, skills and experiences of all employees. This includes differences in race, gender, age, lifestyle and ethnic background as well as differences in experiences and ideas.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

With the business imperative understood, leaders need to establish a framework for improvement and change. This framework must start with leaders' role modeling inclusive behaviors in the organization, establishing clear accountability and expectations for results, and addressing specific actions for employee education, talent acquisition, development and retention. Cultural and work climate issues that create barriers for diverse talent have to be addressed, and proactive outreach strategies (community, supplier and customer) with key external groups cannot be ignored.

Specific measures and performance indicators should be established, and performance monitored on a regular basis to assure focus and the anticipated results. More progressive companies are tying variable pay awards to diversity results.

IN SUMMARY

We all live in one world. This world is rich in its biodiversity and human diversity. If we are to sustain the integrity of the place with which we have been entrusted, we must protect it with passion and with dedication. The quality of the environment in which we live is the most significant part of the legacy we will leave for future generations.

The environmental movement has plenty of room for increasing diversity in its ranks. The movement would be well served to build the “environmental case” for diversity just as corporations build the “business case.” The movement cannot be indifferent to the need to diversify and to be more inclusive.

The environmental movement would be better served to capture within their ranks the talent of the growing demographic of talented people of color. As the movement tackles global issues, they will encounter different races, cultures, values and issues. The richness of a diverse workforce and pipeline is important and should be carefully considered in any implementation strategy.

The great conservationist Aldo Leopold said:

Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization. Wilderness was never a homogenous raw material. It was very diverse, and the resulting artifacts are very diverse. These differences in the end product are known as cultures. The rich diversity of the world's cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth.¹¹

In the end, the question posed by the young African-American boy in New Orleans symbolizes the question the environmental movement, global corporations, and governments need to answer.

“*What is we gonna do?*”

I believe the answer is pretty self-evident.

¹¹ Leopold, Aldo. 1949. “Wilderness” from *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches from Here and There*, Oxford University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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