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Inclusion over Diversity

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Recently I participated in a two-day event hosted by the Insights Association's IDEA Council. The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access Council is one of many initiatives in the global insights community to address issues of diversity and inclusion not only in the make-up of our industry but also in the way we go about our work and the participants we engage in our research. Other such initiatives include the MRS's Diversity, Inclusion and Equality Council, Colour of Research, and Insight in Color.

One speaker in particular caught my imagination when she said that inclusion comes before diversity. What did she mean and why is there a distinction? As I started to think this through, her meaning became clear.

Diversity is not Inclusion

What I came to realise is that diversity as an end goal lacks meaning. Diversity can be achieved in a number of ways. It can mean diversity of gender (for example, having more women in senior management), in ethnicity (more people of African descent or Hispanics or Asians – you choose), or in background (educated at public institutions, from poorer geographies), sexual orientation, or disabilities. A company can claim "diversity" by following any of these routes or maybe a combination of them. But that doesn't mean that that company is inclusive. Diversity can be selective and even downright exclusive.

To be inclusive means that the door is open to all comers, whether that means the people that we sample or those that we hire. It means that our working environments don't just include people who are "different" to us, but that those environments are welcoming and that they really do "include" people of diverse backgrounds in every aspect, both work-related and in a company's social life. It means that our recruitment processes are naturally inclusive – and that the algorithms we use in weeding out résumés are free from inattentive, unconscious, exclusive biases.

Inclusion leads to Access

Inclusion is the precursor to all that follows. It is a conscious mental attitude that is not just the rejection of exclusion but our acknowledgment of the need to embrace all of humanity in everything that we do. This starts with access – the ability of all hues of human life to access what we do, whether it be as participants in our research or among our ranks as researchers

and data analysts. In the past, the insights industry has been (to be polite) lackadaisical in its efforts to enable access, both in our outreach to different communities or in our sampling methods. We have not made the effort to put out the welcome mat nor to educate people of all different backgrounds about the opportunities that research presents.

From this we can see that enabling access is not a passive stance but an active one. We have to be the ones reaching out, we have to involve different segments of society in what we do, we have to consciously offer the opportunity. In the United States (and probably elsewhere) there has long been a political and academic argument over the benefits and disbenefits of "active discrimination", mainly as it relates to college admission procedures. Opponents argue that such procedures should be "colour-blind" and offer "equality" to all who seek admission to university. But equality is not the same as equity. "Equity" takes into account differential barriers to access and seeks to compensate for them. Equity accounts for in-built structural biases such as access to educational resources, economic backgrounds and societal barriers. The same applies to our industry – if we have not consciously made an outreach to be inclusive, we have built inequity into our systems and our procedures.

Equity is not just about Access

However, it is not sufficient just to mend the flaws in terms of access. Once people are 'in the system' we need to ensure equity of treatment. For example, equity in terms of being able to participate in research means that we can't just rely on a single system of response. If relying solely on online as a method of soliciting response does not create equity for those who do not have reliable internet access, then we need to work out multimode methods of ensuring they are included.

Similarly, once people have entered the industry, we need to give the same access to training and mentoring as is available to their peers. We need to evaluate them on a level playing field, include them in key meetings, listen to their viewpoints, and give them the same chances of advancement as are available to everyone else.

IDEA is a self-generating ecosystem

In the end, the notion of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access becomes not only self-sustaining, it becomes a living mechanism for growth and strength. Inclusion leads to Access. Access leads to Diversity. Diversity is supported and strengthened by Equity. And that, in turn, leads to further inclusion in every aspect of what we do.