
New Kid on the Block: Your Part in the American Diversity Revolution.

Series: Part 6

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Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.

- Edmund Burke

A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right.

- Tom Paine

Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds will continue in others.

- Rosa Parks

The past fifty years or so have been the most amazing time in corporate life in America. At the beginning of that period African-Americans, Latinos, LGBT, and women were, with extremely rare exceptions, excluded from corporate management. Think of that. Within the span of a single career we have created a workplace in which all those manifestations of race, biology, persuasion and preference are now almost incidental to talent and ambition. When so much change occurs within such a relatively brief period of time it is no exaggeration to call it a revolution. How did such a transformation come about? What does it imply about the future?

America was a diverse nation even before it was officially a nation. Every major European nation wanted a piece of the huge pie that was 'The New World'. And, as was their custom, they fought for their various pieces. While men like Edmund Burke were counseling rational evolutionary change, others, like Tom Paine, were urging their countrymen to create a new kind of government based on universal justice. Those two strains run deep in our political DNA and in the ways we organize ourselves in large commercial ventures.

All of the battles for "rights" that have occurred in the past fifty years can trace their impetus back to the idealism that drives an American philosophy based on fairness, justice, and equal opportunity. That idealism forged what at the time were considered unlikely alliances in which those in power ceded at least some of their power to a higher ideal. Both Burke and Paine were right – in time progress does happen, and seizing the time makes it so.

As with all cataclysmic social events, like war and revolution, making history is a dirtier job than writing history. The former is done without fanfare as one person at a time decides to stand up, the latter mythologizes the former – we remember the glory of Rosa Parks more than her weariness and dogged determination to rest her tired feet. But every day a new history is being written by individuals doing their jobs in large corporations, chipping away at the remaining prejudices and impediments, with little to gain for themselves but with much to gain for us all.

It is a commonplace to hear those who grew up during the Great Depression maintain that while they were undoubtedly poor, so was everyone else, and so no one thought of themselves as poor. It is only in looking back that the poverty can be seen clearly. It is only in looking back that most of us can see how we impoverished ourselves by excluding others from making their own unique contributions to our mutual enterprise.

We need to remind ourselves occasionally how easy it is in the thick of things to overlook the fact that while we are performing our daily tasks we are also in a bigger game.