Applying An Equity Mirror to Collective Impact

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There has been increasing buzz about “equity” and “racial equity” in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors and among cross-sector collective impact efforts. This is a good thing and our nation’s persistent and rising racial and economic disparities demand it. Many groups are applying an “equity lens” to look outward at social problems and solutions, disaggregating data and seeking to differentiate opportunities and services to reduce disparities. But our organizations and collective efforts must begin by looking inward, using an “equity mirror” to examine our own composition, culture, and policies that reinforce and perpetuate societal disparities. To do equity, we must also be equity.

Equity recognizes that we don’t all start at the same place, that persistent disparities will not be solved without targeting certain opportunities and supports to individuals who start further behind or face additional barriers. It is distinct from equality because equal opportunities are not equal if we start in different places with different advantages or barriers. Racial equity recognizes that the historical legacy and persistence of racist systems, policies, and culture requires that we directly name and work to address racial disparities so that one’s racial identity is not a predictor of their educational, health, economic, or other outcomes.

An example of this shift in perspective from equality to equity is “Black Lives Matter.” This phrase has made many uncomfortable, and wonder why the activists don’t say the more equality-based “All Lives Matter.” We know from extensive evidence that the outcomes for white people and people of color at every step of the justice system from profiling and arrests through sentencing and parole are different even when all other circumstances are the same. It is clear when witnessing so many police shootings of African American men during the past few years, especially when contrasted with videos of police not shooting armed white men, that there is a disparity in how lives are respected and valued. Of course all lives matter, but the disparities in treatment and outcomes call on us to target our solutions to the disparity.

Equity, as a practice, is more than a program. PolicyLink, which promotes equitable solutions for nonprofits, philanthropy, and government, describes equity as “just and fair inclusion.” They define that inclusion in part by the notion that those closest to the nation’s challenges are central to finding solutions - the wisdom, voice, and experience of local residents and organizations is critical to creating solutions that ensure all individuals reach their full potential. It is a form of self-determination, agency, and leadership, not just a program of service.

Nonprofits, philanthropy, and collective impact efforts have begun to embrace the notion of equity and even racial equity, but the focus has often turned to the technical aspect - how we can use data to disaggregate results and work to achieve better
outcomes for those who are further behind - than the adaptive aspects - how do we change our policies, practices, and culture to ensure that our organizations practice the equity internally we seek to affect externally through our programs and outcomes.

Our cross-sector leadership tables too rarely reflect our communities. Even among our nonprofits, multiple studies indicate that the more than 80% of leaders are Caucasian, and that younger nonprofit leaders may be less diverse than their older peers. Nonprofit talent pipelines, networks, and hiring practices often reinforce and maintain these disparities. We cannot justify our lack of internal diversity on our boards, committees, and staff by hiding behind a commitment to equitable outcomes. Too many nonprofit organizations and foundations cover their annual reports with photos of children and families of color while the photos in the back of their board and staff leadership are predominantly white. They obviously find no irony or discomfort in publicizing this.

To address disparities in programs and results, we need to move upstream to the disparities in the leadership tables deciding how to solve problems. We need a breadth of people and perspective at our tables, especially the many tables involved with collective impact, to properly diagnose problems, interpret data, choose strategies, consider trade-offs and unintended consequences, define success, and evaluate whether we are succeeding. If we were in a fishbowl surrounded by those whose lives we impact, would we have the same conversations and make the same decisions? Would they feel their experience was represented and understood?

Looking into the mirror on our practice of equity requires three steps:

1. **Be aware** - even vigilant - about who is and is not at our tables. This awareness must be ever present. We must unpack why our tables are not as diverse and equitable as it should be - not to elicit justifications, but to elicit awareness about the biases in our culture, policies, and practices that have allowed us to be comfortable without equitable representation.

2. **Examine our breadth of perspectives.** Do we have all the voices and perspectives we need at the table to properly understand and solve the problem. How might our perspectives be distorted by our own power and privilege? What perspectives might enhance our understanding of the problem, the community context and population affected, potential solutions, and unintended consequences. Do we create an environment where diverse perspectives are welcomed and heard?

3. **Commit** - internally and even publicly - to goals for increasing the diversity of people at our tables to better represent our community or population we are working to impact. This is where the rubber meets the road and diversity efforts move from ideals to actions. What gets measured gets managed and equity and inclusion start at the top with accountable leadership.

Once a commitment is made and new people and perspectives are at our tables, we must understand that changing who is at the table will necessarily change the table itself. The shape of our conversations will change. There will be new conversations, new learning.
and even new conflicts. This is what we invite and what we need to get more innovative, effective, and sustainable solutions. It is in the learning we will become better leaders, better organizations, better collectives, and have better impacts.

If an organization is seeking to be more diverse, inclusive, and equitable in staff composition, it takes clear commitment and action. A 2011 report by CommonGood Careers and The Level Playing Field Institute found that a significant disconnect exists between the stated values and beliefs of nonprofit organizations regarding the importance of racial diversity, and their attempts to proactively increase diversity and inclusiveness within their organizations. While almost 9 out of 10 employees of color believe their organizations value diversity, more than 7 out of 10 believe their employer does not do enough to create a diverse and inclusive work environment. Employees of color state that this is because of a reliance on “empty talk” but not action and the lack of staff diversity itself. They argue that leadership must make clear and measurable commitments, communicate clearly inside and outside the organization why increasing diversity at every level is a critical priority for greater mission achievement, analyze where bias may be hiding in hiring and promotion policies, and invest in mentoring, coaching, and development. To change who is at the table, the table itself must change.

Such change can take time. Groups can’t replace half their staff or board overnight, or double their sizes. Groups can’t always create a Noah’s Ark either by ensuring they have two of everyone. And groups should not practice what blogger Vu Le calls Fakequity - if you commit to it, you must authentically commit to equity as a strategic priority for your mission. There are creative interim and supplemental approaches to widen your perspective and bring greater equity into your organization as you continue to diversify internally:

- Contract outside advisors or partner with a more diverse organization to supplement experience and perspective;
- Create targeted internship and mentoring programs outside your typical networks that surface diverse and representative young talent;
- Create advisory boards that supplement and feed into the governing board;
- Create a kitchen cabinet of advisors that bring different perspectives and coach leadership on the change process;

Utilize constituency voice or community building strategies to bring the voice, experience, and leadership of the constituency served to leadership tables and demonstrate through decisions that they were heard.

This may be a big commitment of time, attention, and resources. But we can’t continue to do the same things and expect different results. The diversity of nonprofit leadership in America has not moved in the past 20 years while our population has become more diverse. In 20 years, the majority of working age Americans will be or soon be people of color. This is also true of the cross-sector leaders we engage to work with nonprofits to solve problems. A commitment to racial equity means we must reflect the changing
America not reflect America's racial disparities. And our solutions will not succeed and sustain if not informed by and led by those closest to the problems we are trying to solve.

This work requires leaders to be transparent and even vulnerable about where we have failed, own our needs for improvement, and open ourselves to learning and change. It also requires leaders to be willing to compromise and even sacrifice for the greater good. It also means sometimes we must slow down. As we continue to step up and lead when appropriate, we also know when to step back, step aside, or step out.

While this work can be hard at times, it can also be joyful. Leaders often feel a greater confidence and have healthier organizational cultures when they are inclusive. Many of us have learned these lessons and the value of this work the hard way. We must continue to strive toward equity in our organizations, our collective efforts, and in our results. Rising inequality is the issue of our age, and often our work is at the forefront of fixing it. That fixing must start within.

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