As businesses and individuals struggle to find their voice and place in addressing racism and inequity, some are using the word unity as their starting point. This is a good thing. To be clear, the challenge extends beyond words and symbols to create a transformation over a declaration. One of the biggest barriers to addressing racism and inequity is finding a common language that will allow people to have meaningful dialogue and collective problem-solving. This means we need to define the terms we use and the definition of unity which is employed here is: caring about each other in a way that goes beyond our individual/selfish interests to create something better for everyone. This definition might sound and feel as if everyone agrees, everyone comes together in a big circle to hug, and that all is right in our individual and professional circles. However, this definition of unity is not some abstract or Utopian goal but rather a foundation for discussion and problem-solving. I believe that Unity is the only platform for healing, reconciliation, progress and true change. It is not about homogeneity but rather about humility and collective growth.
Let’s break it down a bit: homogeneity suggests we think, say, and agree on the outcomes and impact we want to make. There is no dissension and all is well in paradise. This is unrealistic as we will not agree on everything. Humility calls for us to listen and work toward common goals. When you truly care about your fellow human being, you develop solutions that benefit all. In part because it is the right thing to do but as importantly, it produces better outcomes and real impact. Part of that outcome and real impact is collective growth.

Unity calls for us to shift from the belief that differences make us enemies to differences make us perfect collaborators. When we internalize that we don’t have all the answers, we become more willing to entertain different views and opinions. This doesn’t mean we agree, it simply means we add compassion to our problem-solving toolbox. For example, when we understand the real impact of pay inequity on our employees we begin to develop solutions that benefit them. When we care more about addressing this inequity and less about making more money than our counterparts it doesn’t mean we get paid less. It does mean they get paid more. The amazing result is when you care about others your caring benefits everyone, including yourself. Financially secure co-workers are better able to bring more of their selves to work because they are not as worried and concerned about their finances and can then concentrate on the problems at hand. This added concentration helps everyone. It saves time, generates better ideas, fosters collaboration, and yes, increases revenue!

Admittedly, the path to unity is not easy. There are so many barriers individually and systemically. Unity calls for a mindset shift that will transform individuals into fully functional teams and collaborators. The journey to Unity is intentional and deliberate. You don’t get there by hoping others will see your side of the argument but rather by caring about the well-being of others. Theodore Roosevelt’s quote “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” rings true for many people. However, caring is difficult to display because it requires individual solutions to personal issues and it shifts the mindset from an equity framework to an equity framework. Many leaders love the word equality because it is much easier to execute than equity. Equality says I treat everyone the same. Equity says I provide people what they need to be successful and that takes caring about individuals versus holding steadfast to uniform policies. The most valuable leaders help others to become their best. There will always be financial limitations to the number of resources you can pour into your people but the great thing about caring is it doesn’t cost a thing. Putting caring into action does require resources but the most valuable component to caring is human resources over financial ones. Additionally, companies must resist using whatever financial and material limitations they encounter to justify not solving a problem. Don’t allow obstacles to get in the way of maximizing the most precious resource a company possesses, human capital. The question is not why aren’t your workers doing a great job but rather what can you do to make them great? You can’t answer the latter without unity - genuine care for others.

Where are you on the unity spectrum?

**SUB-LEVEL**

**LET’S TREAT THEM BADLY**

Individuals at this level have a genuine dislike and disdain for others. Unfortunately, they can’t listen or discuss and are closed to any other thoughts which don’t align with their beliefs. It should go without saying that this position is dangerous personally and professionally. We should all be on a quest to grow. One of the first steps is being open to hearing other thoughts and positions. Companies can’t regulate what you think and believe personally but they can demand a willingness to listen and be open to other thoughts and opinions. Their success depends upon it and so does yours.

**LEVEL 1**

**LET’S NOT TREAT THEM BADLY**

Neutrality defines this level. Organizations and individuals do not go out of their way to treat anyone in a negative manner. They take great pains not to mistreat people. They may not being nice, but they are not mean either. It is an approach taken by companies and individuals who desire to stay out of trouble. If they are not treating people badly, the company can stay out of the media, avoid social media backlash, and minimize bad publicity. This approach may appear to be a great strategy from a business perspective, but in reality, it leaves money on the table. Instead of playing to win, the company is playing not to lose.

**LEVEL 2**

**LET’S GIVE THEM A CHANCE**

Many companies are at a point where they have agreed that diversity might be good for their organization. Let’s give them a chance means they are not convinced that this will work but it feels like the right thing to do. Given the possibility that the upside might be substantial, the company is open to exploring diversity’s impact. All the mechanisms might not be in place to foster success but the company is hopeful diversity will work within their culture and people. It is clear that the organization is not convinced and it shows in their level of commitment to the concept and the process.

**LEVEL 3**

**LET’S INVOLVE THEM IN THE PROCESS**

This level incorporates some of the characteristics of an inclusive leader, a leader who recognizes the presence of diversity and is determined to use it. Many companies have diversity but they don’t activate it. These companies allow culture and conflict avoidance to rule the day. Culture says we do it this way and everyone should conform. This is the opposite of unity because it stifles innovation and dissent. Avoiding dissent is an invitation to problems down the road. The inclusive leader welcomes dissent and conflict as it leads to amplified problem-solving. Diversity should not be used as simply a checkup to avoid doing something offensive in the marketplace but as a strategic point for being effective in the workplace and successful in the marketplace.

**LEVEL 4**

**LET’S LEVERAGE THEM IN KEY ROLES**

One might believe that inclusion leverages all people in key roles but that is not necessarily the case. Diversity is having them at the table, inclusion is providing them a plate of food while leveraging is inviting them to help develop the menu, have input on the venue, and help pick the vendors. Many companies have diversity and levels of inclusion but leveraging diverse people in key roles is inclusion elevated - diverse people at all levels of the organization.

**LEVEL 5**

**LET’S BECOME BUSINESS PARTNERS**

True unity is realized when individuals and businesses come together for mutual benefit, when both parties believe the other can help them and they can help the other. When individuals truly believe they are just helping others out, their actions are more altruistic than business building. A partnership is about true business building, mutual respect, and reciprocal value. Business relationships take on a different persona than altruistic ones. The partnership says we each bring value to the table and we each can help the other improve their business or area of responsibility - that is the definition of Unity! When people care about one another where they work to make each other better they are creating a partnership.

At the foundation of unity is a deep belief that we are truly better together. I believe there are three necessary components to any Unity Blueprint: Introspection, Accountability, and Partnership each of which we explore below.

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THE UNITY BLUEPRINT

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

UNITY: Everyone brings their best and effectively collaborates to achieve outstanding organizational results.

WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER

The three keys to business unity

1. BUSINESS INTROSPECTION

Unity doesn’t just happen, it is an action word. The action includes thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that support the proposition that unity improves everything and uplifts everyone. The key to achieving unity is for companies to get in the game. In many ways, we champion individuals over groups and teams. We take great pains to highlight our achievements because we have been told that it is more valuable than group achievement. What we ignore is that almost all individual achievement has a group behind it and all group achievement has individuals who power that achievement. We truly are better together and having a unity mindset doesn’t diminish your individual strengths and accomplishments, it amplifies it.

Not only does the concept of unity require a recalibration of our emphasis on individual achievement versus team achievement, but it also requires companies and the individuals who make up those companies to conduct real introspection. How committed are you to real change? Do you have a course of action and a strategic plan? And what is your level of competence to execute that plan successfully?

COMMITMENT

Real commitment is driven by one’s thoughts and beliefs. If the thoughts and beliefs are: we are doing others a favor, the commitment level will be low. If the thoughts and beliefs are: we are better together, the commitment level will be high. Here’s the key — many people believe doing is the way you show commitment but the reality is people do things they are not committed to all the time. Employees follow the rules and regulations they don’t agree with because that is the rule and regulation. Thoughts and beliefs are the foundation for commitment and companies have to be transparent with employees in order to truly influence those thoughts and beliefs. Frequently, employees are off in a corner grumbling about the unnecessary policy the company has implemented. This is usually because the employees were not part of the process, don’t understand the big picture. Or have not been communicated with in an effective manner. When people are part of the process or are informed about the process, it is only then that there is true accountability. Top-down rules without bottom-up input allow management to blame others when a plan is not clear or is not implemented. It also allows the employees to opt-out of responsibility by saying those rules were made without understanding the impact on customer-facing employees. Accountability starts with working together, and you can’t have commitment without accountability.

COURSE

Once the commitment has been established, a course must be developed. Understandably, people want to make things happen and frequently get enamored with the do, but jumping to the do before figuring out the why is not an effective plan. The keyword is the plan. Developing a course of action establishes a north star. Why are you taking this path? What outcome do you desire? How will that outcome impact multiple stakeholders? And have you planned for contingencies? A plan can’t predict all scenarios but it can help us be strategic with our time, effort, and money. It is natural to react to an event and determine you need to do something but it is foolish to do something without a plan. While this is business 101, it is one of the most ignored practices in business today. Don’t react before you reflect.

COMPETENCE

Commitment and course are not enough. There has to be a level of competence for true transformation. A doctor can’t be effective in surgery if she has never performed the procedure. Similarly, a company cannot be good at executing a diversity, equity, and inclusion journey if they know nothing about the subject. We consistently see examples of people being put in positions without the competence to thrive at those positions. Many managers have been promoted because they have done a good job in their role not because they were good managers. No wonder many managers are not successful in leading people. Gallup found that companies fail to choose the candidate with the right talent for the job 82% of the time. In addition to the fact that bad managers cost companies billions of dollars, their lack of competence as managers adversely affects the company’s ability to stay the course, and to bolster commitment.

Are you committed to real change? Have you developed a real plan and course of action? Do you have the competence to effectively execute your plan? If not, embark on some real introspection to align your organization for transformation.

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2. BUSINESS ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is not some bad word that should make people feel threatened or nervous. It simply means to hold people responsible for their area of expertise and what they have been charged to accomplish. From a business perspective, it makes sense that companies seek accountability when developing the product. Additionally, the company must look at its people and its purchaser (the customer) when broaching the concept of accountability.

THE PEOPLE

Have you heard people say that good diverse talent is hard to find or in short supply? We all have and unfortunately, some of the most accomplished companies in the world tend to throw their hands up in defeat and surrender to the notion they can’t find talent. These same companies are solving some of the most complex problems known to the world but they refuse to tackle the problem of diversity. Diversity people can be found and developed. Companies must stop waving the white flag decrying they can’t find diversity and hold themselves accountable in the same way they would with any other endeavor.

The first stage is hiring and part of the solution is to help create the employee pipeline. Align with professional organizations, develop training programs, and look in places other than your feeder schools and organizations. People can be found.

The next stage is to develop a plan to keep that talent. Many companies recruit well but fail to work on retention. In the same way, a current customer is more valuable than a future customer so is a current employee more valuable than a future employee. There is no retraining, the current employee has already bought into the notion that this might be a great company to work for and there is no acquisition cost. Retention may appear to be a no-brainer but companies should work as hard to keep employees as they do to attain them. Not to mention that dissatisfied employees adversely impact a company’s ability to hire new employees.

The next stage is the promotion. There is sufficient evidence that diverse employees are promoted less frequently than their White counterparts. Many industries are not only struggling with hiring people of color but also with promoting them. Companies must be committed to figuring out why it is that people of color are less likely to be promoted and address this issue. Losing good people is costly. Additionally, people of color want to know that there is no sticky floor or glass ceiling. Seeing diversity at all levels of an organization is one sign that there is mobility within the organization.

THE PURCHASER

It should go without saying that the purchaser is at the core of a company’s success and ensuring purchaser loyalty is the ultimate goal. Companies work at creating loyalty through product features and capabilities, marketing, philanthropy, and community presence. It is critical to signal to your customers you value them at all levels and touchpoints. You value them by developing the product features and capabilities that are appealing to them. You value them by marketing the product in a targeted manner to say we are talking to you. You value them through philanthropic efforts which are important to that target. And you value them through your interaction with the greater community. When your customers see that your commitment to diversity is elevated through partnership, they too become champions for a relationship based in unity. Who is accountable for making sure the purchaser is considered at all levels of the organization? Organizations find themselves in hot water when they fast track the process at the expense of the purchaser. Many times, this fast-tracking results in the purchaser uncovering challenges in the product or relationship incongruent with building purchaser loyalty. If the product is right but the marketing isn’t targeted correctly with the right language or the appropriate situations, purchasers will be the first to let you know. The hope is you did your due diligence before there is an issue. And hopefully by doing so, when an issue arises, the loyalty you have created will have your purchasers working with you versus against you.

The concept of Unity demands accountability. Unity is not about everyone agreeing on the final decision but rather agreeing on how the decision was reached. Everyone must be accountable to give their input before the decision is made, not afterward.

3. BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

When companies and organizations seek business partnerships over zero-sum scenarios where one entity wins and the other loses, they are practicing the concept of unity. Companies need to ask if their relationships with minority businesses are vendor or partner relationships. To be sure, companies should have both. Vendor relationships are mostly transactional ones and don’t always result in a win-win for both parties. If businesses believe just purchasing a product from a vendor is a win-win then most likely they don’t understand the vendor’s business model and issues. Partnership relationships demand that both parties win because at the core of a partnership is a mutually beneficial outcome. When corporations seek collaborations as a core value, they cease looking at a relationship as altruistic but rather good business. They also have a deeper understanding of their partner’s business and goals.

The companies listed in this publication can easily provide your organization with a product or service and by patronizing these companies they should immediately realize a benefit. However, we are better together is about shared values and shared successes. If the relationship doesn’t include a strategy steeped in partnership, the relationship has no real foundation for longevity. In rough times the vendor is more susceptible to fluctuations in the market. However, when the relationship is steeped in a partnership, both parties understand and believe that the demise of one will adversely impact the health of the other. Approach this list of companies with a partnership mindset as a starting point and you will build a relationship that will last beyond mere widgets and orders.

The residual benefit of a partnership is the impact that relationship has with the communities in which the businesses operate. Business partnerships with entities within a specific community create a unity that produces goodwill in turbulent times, generates positive outcomes for the partnering businesses and those who live in that community, signals that the company values the community, and attracts a wide range of people who want to work for and with those companies.

It would be an oversight to not mention that companies reviewing the list of minority businesses displayed here should look at the range of business partnerships they can create with these businesses and hopefully expand beyond this list. You will find that the range of products and services extends to almost every industry: landscaping and construction companies, supply and materials vendors, food service companies, banks, and financial companies, just to name a few. A great example of a partnership is Netflix depositing money with Black Banks. Netflix still receives a competitive rate of return, the bank increases its capacity to make loans, the community has better access to capital while both businesses make money. Business partnerships are business collaborations designed to elevate all parties. Let’s partner in unity for we are truly better together.