



## Race Matters, II

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With the University of Michigan case pushing diversity into the news again, it's a good time to take a stab at reconciling one of the contradictions that complicate the debate.

Slice up diversity and look at its guts and you see a tangled, muddled series of conflicting values and near-certain paradoxes. Though you can't usually tell from the daily news, diversity is more than just winners and losers; more than the stark choice between perpetuating racism and lowering standards.

Anybody wanting a break from the daily exhumation of that false dichotomy should have a look at the dilemma that has bedeviled a group of high-ranking media leaders.

They are black, Latino, Native American, Asian and white media managers—all part of the McCormick Tribune Foundation's annual fellowship program. Polled last summer on the elements that help them succeed, media leaders of color generated a list that anyone with ambition would want to have tattooed to a limb.

The resulting report, "Executives of Color: What it Takes to Succeed," articulates the elements of achievement, defines what it means to be a mentor and adds to the discussion insights into how race, ethnicity, gender and faith can alter the road to success.

...none of the McCormick Fellows specifically credited diversity for their rise to the top. Yet, amid all the advice to work hard, persevere, take on extra tasks and form strong alliances, none of the McCormick Fellows specifically credited diversity for their rise to the top. If you missed the irony there, consider that the fellowship itself is intended to help people of color in media organizations to succeed.

Their explanations for the omission illuminate a perplexing dilemma in today's polarized debate: to give credit to diversity is to take credit away from ability. That's hardly news. It's the argument U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and California activist Ward Connerly have used for years to justify their opposition to affirmative action. What makes the results of the "What it Takes to Succeed" survey perverse is that even those who champion the cause because they know its power are hesitant to hold their own careers up as evidence of its value.

"To a certain extent, the gains of people of color are minimized by society in general because of 'diversity,'" one executive said. "And we overreact and want to say, 'Hey, I got this because I'm talented and I worked hard, not because of diversity.' ... There's always that gnawing shadow. It's a disempowering thing to think that perhaps you were not good enough because somebody gave you a break."

The difference here between a simple but unsolvable paradox and a complex truth is the difference between "and" and "or." It's the difference between believing the myth of the pure meritocracy and holding the conviction that considering race, ethnicity, and talent can be a fair way of living the values of diversity.

"Was I hired because I'm black?" Some years ago, a young intern I'd helped hire in New Orleans pulled me aside and asked the question that haunts people of color right up to the executive suites: "Was I hired because I'm black?" Embedded in the question is the fear that diversity is what its detractors and, unfortunately, many journalists mindlessly suggest it is: a zero-sum equation in which you are either black or qualified.

My answer to her: Yes and no. Why yes? We met at Newsday's minority job fair. My newspaper was looking for more journalists of color, especially black journalists. Her race and our goals brought us together.

Why no? Because I met a lot of people that day who didn't get hired. I met a lot of journalists who weren't ready for a mid-sized newspaper like The Times-Picayune. I met people who couldn't write the way she could, who didn't have her creativity, confidence, or potential.

Yes, we're still trying to make up for a racist past. We're still hamstrung by inequity and prejudice alive today. We're striving still to more immediately become the inclusive society we have always claimed to be.

No, none of that takes away from the talent one black intern brought to the table.

Yes and no.

The executives in the "What it Takes to Succeed" survey recognize that the politics of today have no tolerance for that kind of complexity. They know that to give the tiniest discernable nod to diversity is to subscribe unintentionally to the all-or-nothing ethic of the day. They know that all their hard work, perseverance, extra effort and strategic coalition building; all that ability can get reduced to a single true lie:

"Oh, I see. You were a diversity hire."

Diversity or ability? It's not a true paradox. Diversity or ability? It's not a true paradox. Few of those dogging diversity are. Most, maybe all of the conflicts that seem to offer mutually exclusive choices need only more thought—and a willingness to see beyond the simple.

The Fellows in the report are people of color.

And most benefited from "diversity."

And they are talented.

And they are successful.

In the end, it's not all that complicated.

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