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Diversity in Leadership – A Call for Heroes to Turn Words into Action

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Think how history could have been changed if just one person on the bus with a seat had stood for Rosa Parks and with a joyful smile, patted the bus seat where that passenger had been sitting and said, "You can have this spot right here, Ms. Parks. You can have my seat." Imagine that the brave soul who took that action had also worked a 12-hour day, sacrificed for her family, paid for her bus ticket and wanted that seat very much. Consider that both Ms. Parks and the person willing to offer her seat were both deserving of the seat, but a rule fueled by hate allowed Ms. Parks a seat only if someone white did not want it. The fact is, life often presents a limited number of highly desired seats. Bus driver James Blake said, "She was in violation of city codes. What was I supposed to do? That damn bus was full and she wouldn't move back." And, that is almost always the case, the important seats are not sitting empty. Ms. Parks is a hero who was part of a carefully and beautifully orchestrated movement to change discriminatory laws that sparked progress in the Civil Rights movement. So, although imperfect, I love this analogy because it is both literal and metaphorical.

Extrapolate this with me to the seats at tables where important decisions are made or groups of people can be influenced – c-suites, boardrooms, prestigious speaker panels, you name it. There is a qualified, well-intentioned person who worked hard and sacrificed to earn that coveted seat either already sitting there or being offered the seat. But, if that is a person of the same race, nationality, gender and sexual orientation as most of the others at the table, he or she is much less likely than someone of a different background to be able offer diversity of thought to the discussion.

That diversity, so necessary for organizations to thrive, does not exist at most important tables. Most accept that diversity of thought at these tables gives us more successful outcomes. Many have found the courage to speak up, yet, the complexity of the problem leaves us paralyzed as to what action to take to effectuate change. I am a trial attorney and often espouse, "Good attorneys take complex issues and give complex answers, excellent attorneys understand complex issues and give simple answers." Understanding the reasons why entire groups of people have not been offered seats at society's most important tables is complex, as is the path to complete diversity of thought at those tables. However, as part of the complex puzzle, I suggest that we consider one simple, selfless, actionable step toward change.

Let's grossly simplify into three categories of leaders with an opportunity to create diversity at the table: 1) Deciders: those who decide who has a seat at the table; 2) Leaders with a seat: those who have, or have been offered, a seat at the table; and 3) Leaders without a seat: leaders who have not be offered a seat at the table. I've spent the better part of my career thinking about why diversity in leadership is critical for organizations and societies to thrive. Yet, I've focused all of my time on only two of the three categories of leaders: deciders and leaders without a seat. Most people who are paying attention know that educating and sensitizing the deciders is critical. Likewise, even those not paying close attention know that empowering leaders without a seat who are striving to get there is fundamental to diversity. But, for purposes of taking one actionable step forward, let's consider how those who are not deciders, but are leaders with a seat at the table, have power to influence diversity at the table.

I saw a simple, 125-character Tweet from the head librarian for a prestigious university who turned down a spot to speak on a national panel because his acceptance would have made the panel all male. He accompanied his declination with a simple request to the decider to offer his spot to a woman. In our oversimplified equation, this is a leader with an offered seat at the table requesting that the decider offer that seat to a leader without a seat at the table in order to achieve diversity of thought. This selfless act of giving up something that would have been valuable to his own career was not mainly motivated to help a leader without a seat at the table, in this case a woman, but to make the group better by adding a diverse viewpoint, thereby facilitating a richer discussion. This leader's simple but profound action spurred me to consider how much more progress we could make if those with a seat, but who are not deciders, made the choice not only to speak up, but also to step aside.

Our great country was built on self-sacrifice and that has never been truer than this time in history. I was raised on the truth that we reap what we sow and that has proven true in countless situations, both hard lessons learned and sweet victories won. I hope that those willing to turn impassioned words demanding equality into action will consider planting a seed of offering their seat to someone who will enrich the larger group with a diverse perspective. Experience tells me that both the sacrificial leader, the larger group, and our society will reap the satisfying benefits.

What if every non-diverse board member, panelist, c-suite executive and leader with a seat at the table said, "Thank you for offering me this opportunity, but I see that the majority of this group is made up of others who look a lot like me. I care deeply about this organization and its success, and diversity will make us better, so please offer my seat to a diverse leader without a seat at the table." That sounds a lot like a person who cares deeply about a complex problem taking impassioned words and turning them into simple, self-sacrificial action for the success of the whole. That sounds a lot like a hero.