

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO
MUSLIM AMERICAN INCLUSION

THE ROI
OF D&I

IS SYSTEMIC UNCONSCIOUS BIAS
HOLDING YOUR COMPANY BACK?

INCLUSION

*Creating Globally
Inclusive & Culturally
Competent Workplaces*

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COOK ROSS INC.

HOWARD
ROSS

Powering
the Future:
Diversity,
Collaboration,
and Innovation





Howard Ross

Founding Partner, Cook Ross Inc.

Howard Ross is considered one of the world's seminal thought leaders on identifying and addressing unconscious bias. He is the author of the *Washington Post* best seller, *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives* (2014), and of *ReInventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose, and Performance* (2011). His new book, *Our Search for Belonging: How the Need for Connection is Tearing Our Culture Apart*, will be released in 2018.

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Ross has presented and implemented D&I programs in 47 states in the United States and more than 40 countries. His audience has included hundreds of Fortune 500 companies and major institutions. He has led programs at Harvard University Medical School, Stanford University Medical School, Johns Hopkins University, Wharton School of Business, Duke University, Washington University Medical School, and more than 20 other colleges and universities.

In 2007–2008, Ross served as the Johnnetta B. Cole Professor of Diversity at Bennett College for Women, the first time a Caucasian man held such a position at an historically black college and university. He has been published in the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Fast Company*, *Diversity Woman*, *Forbes*, and *Fortune*.

Ross has served on numerous boards of nonprofit organizations, including the diversity advisory of the Human Rights Campaign, the board of directors of the Dignity and Respect Campaign, and the board of directors of the Women's Mentoring Network.

Ross received a BA in history and education from the University of Maryland and completed postgraduate work in leadership and management at Wheelock College in Boston.

Inclusion: What are the biggest issues and challenges for corporate diversity and inclusion leaders right now?

Howard Ross: Corporate diversity leaders are faced with a culture outside the companies that is increasingly polarized and agitated. That will show up in the



Howard Ross receiving the Medal of Honor from the National Center for Race Amity.

“undercurrent” that exists in the organization because of people’s reticence to expose themselves for fear of either official or social condemnation from their fellow employees, or in overt statements that trigger that polarity. As diversity leaders, it is critical that we recognize the importance of being change agents as well as advocates. Often the role of change agent means holding back on your own direct advocacy to support constructive dialogue, but that never means allowing abusive or intimidating behavior to occur.

The other challenge is looking beyond what “feels right” to us, relative to activities and programs we design and implement, and being rigorous in the assessment of what is actually working from a systems perspective. That includes paying attention to the unintended consequences or impact of activities. Education, for example, may feel right, but unless it is combined with other systemic changes, it may actually create more cynicism.

IN: There is a greater emphasis in recent years on inclusion. Has that superseded diversity as the focus and, if so, why?

HR: In my mind, and I think this is true of most quality practitioners, inclusion has always been a part of diversity. As Dr. Johnnetta Cole says, it has never been enough to just ask people to the party—we have to also get them dancing. The emphasis usually depends on the culture of the organization. If representation is still an issue, then an emphasis on diversity may still be primary, but even then inclusion has to also be focused on. For me it’s never an either/or. It’s both.

IN: What brought you to do this work?

HR: I was raised right. All four of my grandparents were eastern European Jews who came to this country in the early 20th century to escape the oppressive environments in which they grew up. Dozens of our family members who

stayed behind were slaughtered by the Nazis, including 43 who died on August 2–3, 1942, when the Nazis wiped out all but 100 of the 5,000 Jews who lived in their community, Trochenbrod, in western Ukraine. My maternal grandfather, who grew up in that village, was one of the leaders of the group who purchased and refitted the *Exodus* ship in Baltimore harbor. My paternal grandmother was an organizer for the ILGWU. So I grew up with two messages: terrible things can happen, and it is your personal responsibility to do something about it. Both of my siblings and I have spent our lives working on social justice issues. I guess you might say it’s our “family business.”

IN: What recent thought-leader topics in the world of inclusion are organizations learning about and implementing?

HR: The topic that has become of great interest to me is belonging. I have been doing extensive research over the past several years and am fascinated by the neuro-cognitive research that is showing that our need to belong is our primary human need. At the same time, we are in a culture that feels like it is descending into tribalism at a level that I cannot remember seeing in my lifetime. Organizations have an opportunity to bridge that gap by creating environments that encourage common visions, because they are among the few places in which we are forced to engage with people who are different from us. We have to teach people the skills to dialogue and seek common ground. That sense of belonging has the possibility of helping to ease some of our societal separation. I discuss this in my upcoming book, *Our Search for Belonging*.

IN: Accelerated globalization has influenced D&I strategies. Will our new administration’s focus on “America First” affect D&I?

HR: Like any strong stimulus, I think it will impact us in two directions. On the one hand, it will embolden people who are antiglobalists and require us to develop new knowledge and skills to understand the nuances of global engagement, and especially ways to avoid backlash against people in our companies who come from or work in other countries. On the other hand, many CEOs of companies that clearly operate globally are stepping into the void being created by the vacuum of leadership, or negative leadership of the government. The recent agreement signed by CEOs to support diversity efforts is an encouraging bellwether of that.

IN: Have your clients asked for your help in being more inclusive of transgender people?

HR: Absolutely. We have been working with our clients on this issue for many years and have even conducted public seminars about the topic. As with most diversity topics, it is

important to begin by helping people reflect on their own biases about transgender people. Often because of a lack of direct, personal exposure, many people are uncomfortable with the topic, and with transgender people themselves without any rational understanding of why. It just feels strange to them. If we don't start by getting them to own and explore that discomfort, then anything we try to do regarding strategies and policies is likely to be limited or fail. We should simultaneously make it clear what values the organization has regarding the full inclusion of all employees, and then have a zero tolerance policy to make sure that accommodations are provided that are safe, and encourage a sense of inclusion and belonging.

IN: As more and more millennials join the job force, has this phenomenon provided challenges for your clients?

HR: Generational diversity can be a challenging topic because on the one hand, we know that there are patterns of behavior that tend to evolve from generation to generation, yet we sometimes create arbitrary lines for those differences, as if somebody is in a different culture because they were born one month earlier than someone else. It is a continuum. That being said, there is no question that, archetypically, the millennial generation has a different orientation than the generations that have come before, in the same sense that we baby boomers did from our parents' generation. The key is in maintaining open dialogue and avoiding getting into being "right" about our point of view from either side. The same new behaviors that bother us might very well be the ones that create a breakthrough in

"D&I leaders have to be willing to challenge our old assumptions and strategies."

approaching things differently, and vice versa. I personally find this generation to be incredibly powerful, engaged, and stimulating, even if the differences in orientation sometimes can become an issue.

IN: How will the CDO role change in the next five years?

HR: I suspect that we will see many companies move toward more integration of D&I into other business functions, and less as a stand-alone department, because some of the best companies who are doing the work have found that to be most effective. Many people who were given CDO titles did not get the commensurate responsibility and level that came with that title. This has created confusion and some cynicism in many organizations because although the title was a C-suite title, the role was not. We are likely to see some "right-sizing" of these roles to make them align with the responsibility level of the position.

I also think that D&I leaders have to be willing to challenge our old assumptions and strategies. Many of the things we have tried over the years, despite good intentions, have just not worked very well. We have to be honest about that and discard or modify them, and try new ideas.

IN: For years, practitioners of diversity and inclusion have been making the business case for D&I. Do you think this message is sinking in?

HR: We have more information today than ever before that shows that how well we manage D&I has a direct impact on workforce, workplace, and marketplace issues, and the public stand of many corporate leaders shows us that many understand that. Like many people, I get weary of having to "sell" that to people, but we have to stay current with the actual data that supports the business case. We also have to remember that "the business of business is business," and be able to build the case in the language and concerns of the people in the businesses we are working in. That means being evidence based, doing our research and homework, and being sure that the information we share can stand up to scrutiny. All too often, as D&I practitioners, because we believe that it is "the right thing to do"—and it is!—we emphasize that aspect of the argument to the detriment of a rigorous business case and therefore don't address the "listening" of those who may not be as inherently committed. Most effective organizational leaders and practitioners whom I know can do both. **IN**



Howard Ross discussing everyday bias with Deepak Chopra.