

DLAGI: Five Years Later: What Difference Have We Made?

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Reflections of a Diversity Leadership Academy Alum

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Mile markers note our progress when making a trip on the interstate highways. Likewise, in life, we have "milestone" dates such as "decade birthdays" or "25th wedding anniversaries." These milestone dates prompt us to pause and take note of our progress. On January 31, 2008, the Diversity Leadership Academy® of Greater Indianapolis (DLAGI) celebrated a milestone event; its 5th Anniversary. With the celebration of this anniversary and the completion of the 5th class, it is apt that we reflect on the difference the DLAGI has made in our lives and our community. Has the program achieved its original objectives? What difference has the DLAGI made in our lives, the organizations that we are affiliated with, and the greater Indianapolis community?

To provide a perspective on those questions it is useful to examine the original objectives of the program. As a member of the inaugural class, one distinct memory I have from the opening session was David Casey, champion for the Diversity Leadership Academy® (DLA) coming to Indianapolis and for Anthem's original sponsorship of the program, stating that it was Anthem's objective to ensure every major decision made in Indianapolis had a DLAGI graduate involved in making the decision. Clearly a lofty goal! With 228 graduates from the program, and over 130 organizations represented,

not sure this aspiration has been fully achieved; however, we are certainly well on our way. Business, community, government, education, and non-profit leaders from across the city have participated in the DLAGI. And, not surprisingly, in five years a number of graduates have changed positions, providing the opportunity to impact both the original organizations that sponsored our participation and additional organizations as well. DLAGI alums certainly have a large and growing presence in the greater Indianapolis community.

Secondarily, as Dr. Roosevelt Thomas articulated at the 5 year DLAGI anniversary celebration, the DLA is fundamentally about individual transformation. It is about building individual capability to make quality decisions in the midst of differences,

similarities, and the related tensions and complexities they create. While the assessment of whether the participant's have built this capability is ultimately an individual determination, my observation is that progress has been made on this objective for many participants. As individuals we have become more diversity competent. While we may remain diversity challenged in many respects, our increased diversity competence enables us to bring forth a higher quality decision making capability.

The progress made in the number of participants and personal transformation is remarkable; however, it doesn't answer the following questions: How are we using our personal transformations and growing presence to make a difference in the organizations we lead and in the Indianapolis community? Have we brought forth our expanded capability to raise the quality of decision making in the organizations with which we are affiliated? Have we utilized the DLAGI to be the powerful force in the Indianapolis community that David Casey originally envisioned?

There are examples of successful completion of CAPSTONE projects and that is certainly one way that the DLAGI has positively impacted the Indianapolis community. However, as an alum of the program, one challenge I have consistently heard participants encountering is obstacles in successfully completing their CAPSTONE project and driving change within their "home" organizations. It seems common that once the program ends, the day-to-day demands of our "home" organizations deplete our energy and time for completing our CAPSTONE project. And, without the formal class time to bring the team together, it becomes hard to maintain team connection. In addition, when DLAGI participant's attempted to implement their new knowledge in their home organizations, I've had

participants report that many people looked at them like they came from another planet. In short, while the DLAGI has some successful CAPSTONE projects and individually DLAGI alumni are bringing a higher quality decision making capability to the organizations that we are affiliated with, DLAGI alumni often have trouble maintaining the momentum to actually implement their CAPSTONE projects and gaining traction in driving change within their own organization.

The fact is that driving any change of any significance is difficult. And, since most participants did not attend DLAGI with other members of their team, we are out of sync with our organizations! While DLAGI participants were actively challenging their paradigms about diversity management, learning new skills and undertaking an individual transformation in approaching diversity issues, most people in our "home" organizations were working on other things! If you haven't completed your CAPSTONE project, it may be too late to bring the project to fruition; however, it is not too late to grow the diversity competence within the organizations with which you are now affiliated. You can multiply the impact of the DLAGI and bring forth an overall higher quality decision making capability in your organization by initiating a few simple actions.

Understand How You Have Changed

Understanding how you have changed regarding how you approach diversity issues sounds very basic. However, the fact is that many people don't take the time to reflect on how they have changed and grown throughout various experiences in their life. How has your thinking changed about diversity? How have you changed the way you act? How is your decision making process different as a result of attending the DLAGI?

For example, I thought diversity management was about dealing with differences. In fact, in looking up the word diversity on dictionary.com, you will find that the definition focuses on differences: "1. the state or fact of being diverse; difference or unlikeness, 2. variety; multiformity, 3. a point of difference." Clearly, I was not alone. However, in the DLAGI I learned that diversity is "any collective mixture of differences and similarities." Similarities are equally important and, perhaps, most powerful as we deal with the tensions and complexities created by the differences and similarities. Particularly memorable for me was the analysis of the Columbine case through the Strategic Diversity Management Process (SDMP) problem solving framework. There were so many areas where the students were similar, but what was focused on by the students behind this terrible tragedy was how they were different, how they didn't fit. The tension was, obviously, explosive and, unfortunately, this is not unique as violence has become an all too prevalent way in our society to deal with differences. In so many ways these students were very similar to the other high school students simply seeking to find their unique identity as a young adult. This learning was further solidified for me as our team selected a CAPSTONE project that dealt with increasing diversity and tension in an Indianapolis high school.

Through DLAGI, I learned to think about conflict as simply differences that have risen to the surface. Through this lens, almost any conflict is, at its core, a "diversity issue." I learned to focus on much more than the differences; to uncover the similarities, the tensions, the complexities, the desired state and the requirements. And, surprisingly, when I do so I often find more similarities than differences. The challenge then becomes to address the diversity components in a manner that maximizes their contribution to achieving the desired objectives. I've discovered that the SDMP problem solving framework is a very powerful conflict management approach.

Understand Your Learning Process

The DLAGI coursework and CAPSTONE project represented a unique opportunity for each of us to delve into the topic of diversity management. We were able to leverage the power of both classroom learning and practical application. The DLA is a powerful framework for learning and it's no wonder that others have a hard time understanding where we are coming from as we attempt to apply our new learning within our organizations. They simply have not had the in-depth exposure to the new ways of thinking that DLAGI participants experienced. As a result, it is critically important that you share not only what you learned, but how you acquired that knowledge or new way of thinking. In short, understand your learning process.

What experience or new information caused you to shift your thinking or how you approach issues where there are

multiple perspectives? What exercises or discussions were most powerful for you? Why? What else was happening at the time that may have made that learning poignant? If you don't understand how you acquired new knowledge and skills, it will be extremely difficult to help others develop their diversity competence.

For example, as I mentioned, for me the application of the SDMP[®] problem solving framework to the Columbine situation was an extremely powerful exercise. For me it was the focus of the model on similarities that struck me. It was the practical application of the model to a very tangible and, in hindsight, potentially preventable tragedy that solidified this learning. The focus on similarities was also very powerful for me as my team analyzed our CAPSTONE project. I've heard from others that the Giraffe and Elephant diversity fable was a very powerful visual for them. What struck you in watching or discussing the video? What learning did you take away? How did that new way of thinking or learning become clear to you? Once you've identified your learning process, what created your "aha" moments, you are now in a much better position to share the concepts with others and introduce others to the language of this "other planet" you visited!

Utilize Your Knowledge to Lead Change in Others

Have you ever had anyone describe what it's like to eat a decadent chocolate dessert and you felt as though you just ate a bite? That is your challenge. Don't just describe the ingredients of your dessert, but share the richness of your experience. Share examples of how you are thinking differently. Highlight how you approach opportunities and challenges differently as a result of your learning. Finally, remember that you can dramatically increase your impact on others by stepping beyond an explanation, finding application to their lives and helping them to apply new knowledge and skills to their work today.

Perhaps in your business or organization you are dealing with a changing customer base, new technology, an increasing product portfolio or challenges in managing a multi-generational, multi-cultural workforce. There are challenges throughout all organizations that would benefit from the application of the SDMP[®] problem solving framework and we don't have to label them as "diversity issues." They are simply issues for which you would likely make a better decision if you would apply a

systematic problem solving approach that 1) effectively clarifies the problem, 2) recognizes the diversity mixture, 3) analyzes the mixture and 4) selects the appropriate action response.

Start with a small group of people working on an important project and apply the tools and learning you have acquired. Build their competence in both applying the tools and learning the language. They will no longer think you are from another planet, but will become powerful partners as you build strategic diversity management skills broader within your organization. Leverage and reinforce their growing knowledge by asking them to lead other projects with challenging diversity mixtures.

Model the Desired Behavior

Model the desired behavior perhaps goes without saying, but it is purposefully last on this list. Throughout my career I have had the privilege to work with many outstanding leaders. Some simply modeled the behavior they expected others to exhibit in their organizations. They were perceived as outstanding leaders; however, rarely by simply modeling the behavior did they teach others how to be better leaders. Rather, it was the leaders who both 1) modeled the behavior they wanted to see and 2) who communicated what they were doing and why they were doing it that made others better leaders. It is these leaders that ultimately changed the culture of their organization.

If you take no other action, by all means apply what you have learned and be a role model for bringing a higher quality decision making capability within the organizations with which you are affiliated! You will be more effective. However, if you truly want to

grow the diversity competence of those with whom you work, more will be required. You will need to share your learning and mentor people while being a role model!

Summary

The challenge each of us was given as part of being accepted into the DLAGI program was to utilize the knowledge we have attained to bring a higher quality decision making capability to all the organizations with which we are affiliated. The real question then comes back to Dr. Thomas's comments that the DLA is fundamentally about individual transformation and the question: "What's been your impact?" If we all accept the challenge and develop our skills in leading change and developing others, our collective impact will truly realize the original aspirations of raising the quality of overall decision making in the Indianapolis community. We are the key links.