

Symptomatic Leadership in Business Instruction: How to Finally Teach Diversity and Inclusion for Lasting Change

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Are business faculty complicit in mythologizing business concepts by ignoring historical precedence? The refusal to examine in totality the history of discrimination and racism allows us to perpetuate a mythology of white supremacy that is enhanced through impotent diversity programs repeated throughout corporate America. This paper examines the importance of demythologizing the business curriculum through symptomatic thinking, which allows faculty and students to untangle the quagmire of diversity and inclusion in corporate America. Students are thereby equipped with tools for behavior transformation in the workplace that uses a symptomatic, rather than symbolic approach, to decision making and problem solving.

The word symbolism.... is a product of reflection upon direct phenomena, not a description of what happens when so-called symbols are potent. Symbolism dominates not only all early art and cult but social organization as well. Rites, designs, patterns are all charged with a significance which we may call mystic, but is immediate and direct to those who have and celebrate them.....Meanings are intellectually distorted and depressed, but immediately they are heightened and concentrated. (Dewey, J., 1925, p. 72)

Man has been colonized by his symbols. To solve today's problems and global conflicts, we must behave symptomatically, eliminating symbolic thought and behavior. Symbolic behavior produces all of the conflicts in the world today vis-à-vis superstition, resulting in racism, religious conflict, greed, and mental illness....Today's populations do not have a real understanding of the function of symptoms and symbols....There is a misunderstanding of symbols by both the informed and the uninformed... Symbols and the symbolic cause confusion. (Ridley, E., 2017)

INTRODUCTION

The United States business landscape can no more afford to function in an environment of denial regarding the changing demographics. The U.S. Census projects growth that will shift the country's racial and ethnic diversity (Humes, Jones, Ramirez, 2011). In addition to the challenges of racial and ethnic diversity, the progress of women, in particular, women of color, in the workplace remains stagnant (Thomas, Cooper, Konar, Rooney, Finch, Yee, Krivkovich, Starikova, Robinson, and Valentino, 2017).

Due to massive societal changes, this shifting landscape has besieged the business environment and demands our focus. The consequence of poorly prepared business students is a continuing legacy of redundant problem-solving. This paper focuses on a procedure for changing the mindset of business students, by introducing an approach to problem-solving that emphasizes symptomatic vs. symbolic thinking. Using a case study methodology, organizational problems are outlined to illustrate how managers can assess and execute change in their environment after introducing an approach that is symptomatic vs. symbolic in managing organizational issues. The case examines the implementation of symptomatic thinking in a corporate environment with an aim towards encouraging authentic leadership in a world of changing demographics. Cutting-edge qualitative research on the negative impact of symbolic thinking and the liberating influence of symptomatic thinking is introduced, along with studies examining women in corporations, including women of color.

It is essential that business students are taught the fundamentals of the origin of symbolic thinking as well as its negative impact on the business world. By engaging business students in real-world organizational problems, students are able to analyze and compare problem-solving when using a cutting-edge approach of symptomatic thinking. The case approach enables students to assess the progress of the intended diversity efforts within a large firm, as well as develop an ability to critique the pitfalls due to continued symbolic thinking on the part of the actors. By demythologizing the curriculum, business students can analyze and evaluate how postcolonial histories intertwine with today's practices of outsourcing and global business; demonstrate knowledge of the multiple aspects of identity [gender, age, race, ethnicity (including White identity), physical ability, religion, class, national and regional identity] and intercultural communication, including multicultural identity; analyze and evaluate symbolic vs. symptomatic interaction in a multicultural environment; analyze and evaluate how differences in social culture influence values in the workplace; and develop insights into the economic and business implications of changing demographics.

Root cause analysis is a tool that the global business world uses to solve problems. Unfortunately, the business world, along with academia, has mythologized the interpretation of this problem-solving method. [There is a] common view that symptoms are not linked to underlying problems. A common statement made by businesspeople and statesmen alike is 'Treating the symptoms could make matters worse.' This view destroys any opportunity of not only solving global economic crises but the problems of human behavior. Certainly, racism is a symptom of superstition and mythology vis-à-vis symbolism. The practice of racism is symbolic behavior.

Symptoms are a significant part of any problem or entity they represent. The business world presents numerous examples of the inability to deal with the symptom, leading to catastrophic results, such as Target ignoring the signs of the breach in its security system; or General Motors ignoring the signs of engineering defects, causing countless deaths (Ridley, E., 2017).

Review of Literature

Traditional approaches to diversity learning are remarkable in their consistent gaps when it comes to addressing historical inequities as an avenue to understanding future opportunities for business when inclusion is emphasized. The current environment of changing demographics, not only domestically but globally, requires, indeed deserves, a more focused approach to addressing this multicultural landscape as the majority/minority language takes on a different shape. It is essential that business instructors consider how to incorporate this conversation into learning outcomes if we are going to impact those future generations that will potentially lead our business world.

It is incumbent upon instructors in the discipline of business to widen their worldview beyond the traditional textbooks that provide only a passing or marginal mention to diversity and inclusion. In order to be effective, business instructors must understand the impact of exclusion in all its forms, including gender discrimination and symbolic racism (Sears & Henry, 2003). Although there is relative comfort in discussing gender issues in the classroom, the gap remains as instructors display an inherent reluctance

and uneasiness surrounding the topics of race and ethnic discrimination (Haynes, 2017). The urgency within the current business environment is palpable, as firms are desperate for competent managers that can tackle the thorny ethical issues within leadership, human resources, diversity and inclusion. The need to change the views that white managers have of Black employees is one that can and must be taught to business students whenever possible. This requires a saturation into the curriculum to equip business students with the tools necessary to overcome what has been called abstract liberalism by decision makers – the notion that racism is color-blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

This paper is focused on how business instructors can enhance their toolbox by utilizing symptomatic thinking to address the gaps in pedagogy, enabling instructors to build skills around the discussion of race, racism, gender discrimination, and other areas of difference that new managers must encounter in the workplace. There is a continuing realization that traditional tools used for teaching business topics are inadequate at best, inaccurate at worst. The pedagogy regarding the challenges faced in business by people of color needs to be enhanced considerably (Amico, 2014). The expanse of research concerning diversity and inclusion is sizable and typically focuses on how to identify problems (Thomas & Ely, 1996). Harvard Business School actively teaches servant leadership to their incoming student cohorts in an attempt at getting students to understand the less fortunate (Nohria, 2017). The ongoing ethics challenges alone have led instructors down a path of supplementing their textbooks with teachings that provide students the tools necessary to ask the right questions.

Research tells us that business students (and indeed faculty) may need some nudging along the cognitive continuum when it comes to a cogent discussion of racial identity development. Amico suggests that there is a need for an “effective pedagogical approach to enable faculty to teach white privilege, especially at predominantly white institutions.” He goes on to say: “We are asking students to change part of their worldview and reject what all their friends, family, and teachers have taught them and endorse. This change will result in emotional and cognitive dissonance and hence will be resisted” (Amico, 2014, p. 19).

Indeed, many faculty may find it challenging to examine discrimination in business, given its multiple representations via interpersonal, collective or institutional (Martin & Nakayama, 2011).

The celebration of ‘American exceptionalism’ and the upward trajectory of the United States, economically, socially, and geographically, is the grand narrative of this country. This grand narrative gives U.S. Americans a particular identity that is important to their notion of what it means to be an ‘American’. In place of the grand narrative are revised and restored histories that had been suppressed, hidden, or erased...recovering various histories is necessary to rethinking what some cultural identities mean. It also helps us to rethink the dominant cultural identity – what it means to be an ‘American.’ (Martin & Nakayama, 2011, p. 74).

If faculty in the business disciplines are going to be effective in the 21st century, they must discontinue relying on the humanities sector to educate business students in the world’s realities. The annals are rich with connective tissue to assist us in this regard – for example, we can demythologize the origin of *Managerial Economics* systems with a systematic discussion of how the practice of slavery informed productivity, efficiency, and human relations management.

That African slaves came under managerial eyes as both assets to be developed and workers to be driven created tremendous tensions in which both the acknowledgment of African capacities and the most dehumanizing connections of slaves to the animal world occurred as two sides of the same coin. Beyond the fact that planters needed to regard African slaves as valuable in order to validate their own fiscal decisions and social system, the realities of plantation life taught that slaves possessed the technical and managerial knowledge that made the plantation work. Because proslavery argument relied on white supremacy, it could credit the genius of Africans only so much. Notions of racial development through white management thus curiously combined a semiawareness of African contributions to the making of the South with wholesale denials of those contributions. ‘Whiteness-as-management’ had material roots in who

bossed and militarily controlled whom, but it was above all ideology covering over large realms in which slaves managed other slaves and performed the skilled labor necessary to production (Roediger & Esch, 2012, p. 42).

Indeed, well before we can introduce business students to those management concepts that drive today's business, we must at minimum augment the gaps in the record, as provided by Baptist:

By 1820, more than 200,000 enslaved people had been transported to the South's new frontiers in the years since 1790. What made this forced migration truly different was that it led to continuous increases in productivity per person – what economists call 'efficiency'. Continuous improvements in labor productivity were extracted from each enslaved person by whip.

Entrepreneurs redirected left-handed power by measuring work, implementing continuous surveillance of labor, and calibrating time and torture. By 1820, the ability of enslaved people in southwestern frontier fields to produce more cotton of a higher quality for less drove most other producing regions out of the world market. Cotton drove U.S. expansion enabling the young country to grow from a narrow coastal belt into a vast, powerful nation with the fastest-growing economy in the world (Baptist, 2014, p. 112-113).

Business faculty are remiss in emphasizing the innovations of Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management without including Taylor's views on race management. "Taylor incorporated race-thinking as he revolutionized management. The assumed need for brutally exploited and racialized immigrant labor formed part of the logic on which scientific management was founded" (Roediger & Esch, 2012, p. 148-149).

Zulema Valdez has explored the impact of the changing demographic landscape on Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management. Valdez' research requires business professors to change assumptions regarding how race, class and gender influence entrepreneurship decisions and opportunities. Business professors must think symptomatically in order to change assumptions.

Social stratification, which is defined as the unequal positioning of groups within the larger economy and society, has an effect on entrepreneurial outcomes. After all, differences in resources and other inequalities affect group members' ability to start, maintain and grow a business. In other words, imbalances at the starting line of business ownership often persist at the finish line, leading to varying rates of success. It is essential to understand and identify the factors that help explain why some groups succeed and others fail (Valdez, 2016).

No less than Thomas Shapiro reminds us that if we are to accurately instruct business students in the field of Economics, and basic Finance, we should be mindful of the role that wealth and inheritance play in escalating disparities.

The real story of the meaning of race in modern America must include a serious consideration of how one generation passes advantage and disadvantage to the next - how individuals' starting points are determined. Our nation continues to reproduce racial inequality, racial hierarchy and social injustice that is very real and formidable for those who experience it (Shapiro, 2004).

Business students would be handicapped in understanding the inherent disparities in wealth generation, if they are not reminded of the origins of Affirmative Action legislation. A continuing belief that Affirmative Action was introduced to assist people of color in the latter part of the 20th century creates a false stigma that persists to this day. This needs to be corrected by business instructors, and we are assisted by Ira Katznelson:

There was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill. As southern black veterans attempted to gain from these new benefits, they encountered many well-established and some new restrictions. This combination of entrenched racism and willful exclusion either refused them entry or shunted them into second-class standing and conditions.

The direct federal welfare provisions that had been offered to families of soldiers during the war had unsettled many white southerners, who observed that with money in their pockets, black women often refused to take on menial household work and black youngsters stayed away from the field. The immense extension of federal largesse could threaten segregation.

In this aspect of affirmative action for whites, the path to job placement, loans, unemployment benefits, and schooling was tied to local VA centers, almost entirely staffed by white employees, or through local banks and both public and private educational institutions. By directing federal funding 'in keeping with local favor', the veteran status that black soldiers had earned was placed at the discretion of parochial intolerance' (Katznelson, 2005, pp. 121, 123, 128).

Methodology: Using a Business Case Study to Apply Symptomatic Thinking

We posit that if business instructors were to change their mindset by using a Symptomatic Thought Process®, the capacity for incorporating changed assumptions into the curriculum would be considerably smoother.

It is important for managers to recognize the symbolism driving their thinking processes when making decisions. Effective management can only be performed with symptomatic decision making. Symbolism has two significant characteristics that inform racism – mythology and superstition. The business environment presents endless opportunities for managers to exercise their judgment free of the boundaries of symbolic thinking – stereotyping that hinders perception of accomplishments of people of color. "Race remains one of the most hotly controversial and highly complex issues in our society. In American society, race is politically and socially defined. Race has been used to reinforce already powerful groups, while weakening those groups with less power; prior to and even into the twentieth century, race determined a woman's political rights and social status" (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

With an emphasis on symptomatic thinking, students develop the ability to identify and appreciate symptomatic thinking in management. "Symptomatic thinking, which is innate to the neurological processes of the human brain, allows individuals to see things as they really are to implement policy and evaluate individuals free of superstition, mythology, and negative thinking" (Ridley, E., 2008).

For instance, if business students are going to understand the origin of efficiency and productivity, then there needs to be a comfort level in the discussion of American slavery as the foundation for modern economic development (Baptist, 2014). This comfort level starts with the instructor, since the average student, if they are from a privileged background, will be exposed to this material for the very first time. Even students who have a minimum of multicultural competencies may be unaccustomed to having such a discussion (Amico, 2014). This has transformative ramifications for equity in business. A key finding is that business instructors need to be courageous in their delivery of this material in order to accommodate changing demographics.

In order to examine this hypothesis, a business case study was used to introduce students to material not heretofore seen. By examining the experiences of an African-American female protagonist in an old-line investment bank, students were introduced to the powerful, cutting-edge, behavioral concept known as the Symptomatic Thought Process® that pushes aside symbolic thinking in favor of symptomatic decision-making. Students are introduced to the damage caused by symbols and symbolic thinking (Ridley, E., 2008). This alone is a provocative approach - students must first be exposed to scholarship not typically shared in the classroom due to a reluctance to confront uncomfortable discussions regarding race, class, and gender discrimination.

The case examines the implementation of symptomatic thinking in a corporate environment with an aim towards encouraging authentic leadership in a world of changing demographics. The cacophony of micro-aggressions experienced by the executive in the case study, along with the continuing discriminatory environment, are sufficient to expose business students to the management choices when symbolic thought is employed, vs. when symptomatic thinking is preferred.

The protagonist pursues a trajectory of individual business accomplishments despite the underrepresentation of African-American management and lack of mentoring in her environment. She experiences serial reporting changes requiring her to constantly reinvent, augment, and/or adapt her skillset to accommodate the frequent deficiencies of her managers, all white males. The protagonist is only effective because she employs a Symptomatic Thought Process® when encountering obstacles (Ridley, L., 2016). By modeling the behavior, the protagonist is able to relay this communication methodology to others, notwithstanding a culture impervious to change. The protagonist is driven to perform at an exceptionally high level with an increasing span of control and project scope; she frequently accepted more accountability than was due her, in an attempt to prove her capabilities - a jack of all trades, a superwoman. This performance intensity is common with women of color in corporate America – the need to prove themselves at every turn. “Being deemed exceptional can mean bearing the burden of living up to unrealistic expectations, never easing up your workload. Many Black women feel that they must be far better at their jobs than their White counterparts just to prove that they have a right to be where they are” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003); Catalyst, 2001).

Response from business students to the approach of symptomatic thinking is revealing. By using this case study methodology to introduce symptomatic thinking into the business environment, students are able to analyze and evaluate symbolic vs. symptomatic interaction in a multicultural environment; develop insights into the economic and business implications of changing demographics; demonstrate knowledge of the multiple aspects of identity [gender, age, race, ethnicity (including White identity) religion, class, national and regional identity] and intercultural communication; and analyze and evaluate how differences in social culture influence values in the workplace.

Today’s business instructors can no longer afford to ignore reality when educating business students. To be in denial regarding the current sociocultural impact surrounding the business world is unfortunate at best, negligent at worst. To dismiss historical inaccuracies only does a disservice to the learning environment. It is not possible to teach business students about affirmative action without including the history of the legislation, which was originally designed to assist white male war veterans get back on their feet after World War II. Business students need to be equipped with tools that enable them to process ethical dilemmas in the business environment without mythologizing, tools that a Symptomatic Thought Process® can provide for them.

The Symptomatic Thought Process® in Business

As noted, the case study on symptomatic leadership has been utilized for learning in multiple settings, graduate and undergraduate. Exposure to a Symptomatic Thought Process® provides a pathway for students to enhance their problem-solving. Application is immediate with graduate students, who are able to implement symptomatic thinking instantaneously in their workplace. Baccalaureate students are immediately able to identify those behaviors that are detrimental to learning and doing business, due to symbolic thought. Real-time responses to the case from business students have been illustrative – following is a representative sample:

Response A: — Symptomatic Thinking is, by far, the most valuable concept I’ve acquired thus far in my academic career. [Although] many topics and theories were perused, the lack of implementing them realistically in conjunction with a failure to proceed pragmatically diminishes their efficacy. The concept of Symptomatic thinking calls for the end of symbolism and emphasizes the cognitive liberation from cultism and superstitious notions to produce a healthy individual. I’ve been applying the principles of Symptomatic Logic in my career by “interacting with others in a way that is sincere without pretension” (Ridley, E.,2017). Furthermore, it proclaims that symptoms should be recognized as evidence of something factual, while symbols that fail to leave a trace should merely be deemed superstitious and tantamount to magic. Contemporarily, in a society plagued with residue from years of racism and oppression, Symptomatic logic is advantageous for those of us trying to prosper and nullify the malignant, yet sometimes covert, traces of oppression that persist. While remaining focused on my objectives,

consistently performing at optimum and unlearning symbolism by explicitly thinking without connotations. Furthermore, I chose to defy any stigmas projected on to me and will refrain from engaging in recursive behaviors including reacting emotionally to destructive comments. I believe utilizing Symptomatic principles as a foundation for future will greatly enhance my overall potential as a person and as a Transformational Leader.

Response B - Within a globalized society, workplaces are becoming more and more diverse, and some organizations view diversity as synonymous with affirmative action, thus they indulge in the practice only to present an image, but do not go all the way to foster inclusion. One of the major roadblocks to inclusion is a symbolic approach to diversity that results in casting those who are different in a stereotyped frame and viewing their existence from the mythological mindset one has created or borrowed from elsewhere. E. Ridley posited that, “[w]hen we encounter people from different cultures, we mythologize that person and his existence; and we make up a description of him according to our own prejudices and idiosyncrasies based on superstition”.

Aside from the general mindset used in stereotyping, a symbolic approach is also used by supervisors and managers to exclude those in the minority from areas such as decision making, planning and problem solving. Our symbolic thought process is used to stigmatize others in such a way that they do not become part of the mainstream contribution to the organization and both the affected individual and organization suffers. Stereotyping can also reduce openness on the part of the stigmatized to use critical feedback to make corrective action, and this inhibits growth for both the individual and organization.

Given the negative consequences to individuals and organizations courtesy of a symbolic mindset, an effective leader needs to encourage symptomatic thinking by encouraging managers and supervisors to see “people as they really are without mythologizing their existence...[because] [o]nly by incorporating a Symptomatic Thought Process can we initiate healthy human behavior” (Ridley, E., 2008). With this thought process, symptomatic leaders will be excluded from stereotyping which renders employees ineffective.

Response C: - Symbols and symptoms are ingrained in our experiences and as long as the people who are creating, promoting, and exposing our culture to those symbols and developing those symptoms are mostly white, heterosexual, economically advantaged, cis gendered men - the symbols and symptoms will always be translated through a lens that is white, heterosexual, advantaged, cis male. [As a white male homosexual], in my work I try to push against the whiteness of the symbols and symptoms as much as I can.

Response D - Symbolism makes racism even more formidable due to the effect that symbols have on certain communities. Symbols, like the noose, reflect a time when the African-American community was seen as lesser than their white counterparts. It is a constant reminder of white supremacy and how some people wish to go back to that era, an era where the African-American community lived every day in fear that they would be able to live on to the next day. We still see the psychological scars of those kinds of symbols. Individuals must think symptomatically to overcome stereotype threat to accomplish their objectives by having a clear goal and patience when dealing with people that are not only ignorant but are not culturally sensitive or aware to different cultures. “Fending off the stereotype” would be to not allow the culture or the color of your skin define you entirely. The culture or the color of one’s skin defines you but it does not mean that is all of what you are.

Response E - Racism has always been a touchy subject. Characteristics of symbolism of racism are that idea that whites are superior to blacks, blacks are unwilling to work hard enough, and prejudice and discrimination no longer exist. This type: modern-symbolic racism, isn’t direct. This form of discrete racism continues to plague African-Americans, especially those in a white dominant workplace, making it daunting for those individuals. Direct racism can be dealt with in the same manner, directly. While indirect

racism can be very intimidating and unsettling, ultimately affecting the work performance of the individual experiencing it.

Response F - Symbolism involves a form of thinking based on symbols and mythical beliefs about race. This kind of thinking creates conflict and misunderstanding amongst people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Although it wasn't affirmed by the white staff, it is a frequent assumption by African-Americans in a predominantly white work environment that diversity is not acceptable and that assimilation is preferred. Stroud was able to approach her responsibilities at work with an edge due to her ability to see things for what they are and not use symbolic thinking. She was often able to address each task that she was presented with, not as an African-American woman, but as a competent manager. Stroud avoided any engagement with symbolic thought references from her white superiors. She maintained awareness of stereotype threat when it presented itself and in doing so she was able to fend it off.

Response G - Racism is a coherent belief that a particular race is superior to another which is inferior. Some of the characteristics of symbolism that render racism daunting are: the belief that the whites are superior to Blacks. Hence, in a work situation, a black employee will always not be considered in decision making on the basis that they are black.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There is considerable inquiry by business schools currently, examining the dearth of instruction that includes real world issues. The current global environment demands that business instructors no longer relinquish ownership of social and political issues to the humanities divisions of their universities. In the 21st century, it is essential that business instructors develop a new mindset that challenges assumptions and corrects the mythologizing of management concepts. By thinking and behaving symptomatically; by adopting courageous approaches to new research, business professors can explore new pedagogical tactics that will liberate the classroom and make it more inclusive for all participants. By discontinuing the desire to think and behave symbolically, instructors will recognize the gaps in the curriculum that require correcting so that students can embrace new learning free of encumbrance.

The writer recognizes the challenges these suggestions may create, especially with business instructors not previously exposed to the topic of symbolic vs. symptomatic thought. The 21st century classroom is already demanding a shift in the way we teach, but the focus has been primarily on new technology modalities. It is past time for us now to focus on behaviors, especially the delivery of instruction to our students!

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