Throwing a curve into street planning for safer communities[1]

The role of a Chief Diversity Officer[2]
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By Theodosia Cook

The role of a chief diversity officer has some surprising connections to 19th century change management and organizational development, yet the critical role it plays today at CU and in other organizations has evolved to a sharp focus on compliance, strategy, implementation and diplomacy.

When people consider the role of a chief diversity officer (CDO), they usually have a limited understanding of its complexity. People often assume a CDO must embody a minoritized identity; be passionate about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work; or be able to provide compelling training opportunities.

These elements can often be assets in the role, but far too often, they miss out on the reality that CDOs (regardless of organizational size and purview) represent a function that emerged from the history of organizational management. This shift in focus centers the questions: How can we set up the function to be successful through structure? And, what competencies are needed for effective diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) leaders?

The emergence of new functions and roles can evoke nervousness within an organization and community because change can be unsettling. Yet the CDO role and DEI function, in general, are a vital evolution in change management and organizational development theory and practice.

This grounding in change management and organizational development theory and practice is not to deny the foundations of DEI work in critical race theory, psychology/psychiatry or law, but instead to emphasize that organizational management is an important, and often overlooked, lens.

Consider the word diversity. It simply means the presence of difference. It is not synonymous with BIPOC, LGBTQ or any other underrepresented group. What happens when an environment becomes more different? What is needed to ensure we engage the fullness of our differences? How do we ensure that people are receptive to difference and value it so that they can collaborate more effectively, and live or work together more harmoniously? These are some of the critical questions that occupy the mind of change management and organizational development leaders. These are also some of the central questions for CDOs.

One powerful way of contextualizing the role of a CDO is to consider the goal of human resource management at its inception in the U.S. Some scholars argue that human resource management emerged from the industrial revolution as factory managers recognized the importance and power of strategic focus on people to drive productivity and output in the commercialization process.

Frederick Winslow Taylor, whom many scholars refer to as the Father of Scientific Management, is considered one of the first management consultants: Legend has it his business card read, “Consulting Engineer – Systematizing Shop Management and Manufacturing Costs a Specialty.” In the late 1800s, Taylor used his engineering background to devise a way of looking at a trajectory of tasks as a holistic process that could be analyzed, optimized and innovated around. Suffice to say, Taylor wanted to improve manufacturing processing times and reduce costs by creating something of an assembly line of specific rote tasks that factory workers used from beginning to end of a product’s production. Over the next century, many evolutions would revolutionize how “people-power,” or human capital, is harnessed to accomplish shared goals, even as Taylor’s Efficiency Movement remained a core pillar of the scholarship.

You may be wondering what Taylor and the Industrial Revolution have to do with DEI. I want to be clear that I am not making the case that the strategic organization and management of people working toward a common goal is an

invention of Europe. Developments in U.S. management history show where we are in a historical trajectory recognized by many scholars. As groundbreaking and transformational as Taylor's work was and continues to be, there has been criticism about the exclusive focus on process and efficiency in the Human Resources and Management fields, and rightfully so. But there is a key piece missing—people's well-being.

Henry Mintzberg, another important management theorist, highlighted that Taylor's engineering lens lacked consideration of social issues and the role that the meaningfulness of work could play for all employees. Mintzberg's work would usher in a generation of interdisciplinary focus and analysis of management efficiency and effectiveness.

Fast forward to present – enter the CDOs.

CDOs should constantly be considering how to supplement Taylor's focus on efficiently meeting goals with Mintzberg's focus on social issues and meaningfulness. People are not machines designed to do rote tasks – and if people are asked to do nothing but rote tasks, much research now points to the diminishing returns of such monotonous, meaningless work on productivity, belonging and, ultimately, retention.

We are complex beings with various identities that show up in an organization, which means we must not only consider whether we are meeting goals and completing specific tasks in a satisfactory manner, but also focusing on how people feel when they join our organization and move through various roles, when they interact with our policies, and when they try to succeed as students, staff or faculty. If people do not feel a connection to the work they are doing, with the people they are working with, and don't have opportunities to develop, retention becomes a significant organizational concern.

We are in a moment of radical societal change where it is necessary to ask deeper and better questions to harness the power of our people's voices and perspectives to do our work effectively as faculty, staff and students. Over the past decade, well-intentioned institutions have gravitated toward tokenizing minoritized faculty and staff and using shared identity or passion for social justice as the sole criteria for DEI leadership positions. We now have recognized that we need to evolve and thoughtfully expand our criteria to ensure that this field is respected, fully supported, but above all, effective.

Just as in the dawn of human resource management, the field, function and role of a CDO are being molded by practitioner trial and error, societal awareness and academia's production of scholarship and research around the topic. Each of these pieces has historically paved the way to knowing today, for example, what strong managers and employees look like.

Much scholarship is emerging about the criteria for effective DEI leaders. The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) is one such body that has outlined standards for diversity officers grounded in organizational development scholarship. You can learn more about NADOHE here[4].

This is the first of a two-part series. Next week: the competencies necessary for a successful CDO and how the position works at CU.[5]

Theodosia Cook is Chief Diversity Officer of the CU system.

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