



## **Should White People Serve as Chief Diversity Officers?**

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Recently, I have had several conversations with white colleagues who have dedicated their educational pursuits towards becoming advocates for social change. Some are experiencing a glass ceiling of sorts, unable to break into fulltime diversity jobs because they are white.

Although the roles of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) vary from institutions, primarily they serve as policy advisors who are also responsible for cultural programming, educational programming and training as well as support for affinity groups. Many diversity offices focus on areas of race primarily, though the trend is moving towards being more inclusive beyond race.

So here's the question; Should diversity/multicultural professional jobs be earmarked for people of color? If so, what is the role of white allies?

In the academic world, the identity of the instructor seems far less important than the content itself. There are countless examples of men teaching women's history courses or white's teaching black history. What seems to be most critical is the ability of the instructor to have a mastery of content.

Are Chief Diversity Officers different than their academic counterparts? Both need content mastery. For CDO's, that content would include an understanding of social justice identity development models, social justice theory and group facilitation to name a few.

Yet, how much do we want allies in the forefront of social change? When allies, more specifically, white allies, are hired as Chief Diversity Officers, is it another example of whites co-opting the power of people of color? Are whites using their privilege, however well intended, to take further opportunities and power away from people of color?

I must confess, I have mixed emotions, as a case can be made for either perspective. Here are some thoughts.

### **Benefits of having whites serving as diversity professionals.**

1. Theoretically, we want allies to do the lion's share of educating folks from privileged groups because of the toll it takes on folks from marginalized groups. So having a white person leading the charge would seem to align with that goal.
2. A white person as a CDO at a predominately white institution (PWI) will be heard differently than a person of color in the same position. As a rule, white people often feel less defensive being challenging by other white people, thus they would be more likely to engage in dialogues around race.

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3. What about people of color who serve as CDO's but who are not inclusive of other marginalized groups? For instance, a person of color who is homophobic and as a result does no outreach to g/l/b/t/q individuals. Would this be preferable to a white CDO who is more inclusive to other issues beyond race?

### **Limitations of having whites serve as diversity professionals.**

1. Perhaps the most salient argument in having a person of color in the position of CDO is the role modeling that takes place for people within marginalized groups. At PWI's, there are few too faces for students of color to identify with so having a strong mentor is invaluable. It allows a safe space for students of color to bring their concerns and to connect with other folks of color.
2. Having a CDO of color, offers a perspective that may be overlooked or ignored on PWI's with regard to race. The saying, "You don't know what you don't know" is a fitting example. Even well intended white people would miss many micro and macro racial aggressions they otherwise might not notice without the help of people of color.

During my own graduate experience in 1983, I recall attending a session on homophobia. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I thought homophobia was the fear of people leaving their homes. I am totally not lying. So when I went to the session with that mindset, I was shocked by the content presented. It was the first time I had personally witnessed a lesbian tell her story unapologetically and with pride. A switch flipped inside of me as I was grappling with my own coming out process at that time in my life. Would a heterosexual presenting the same information have the same impact on me? No. The information still would have been valuable, but the impact would not have been as powerful.

So here's my final thought. If the job description of a Chief Diversity Officer is to focus on racial issues, then I believe it to be critical to have a person of color in that position. However, if the job description extends beyond race and is more inclusive of other underrepresented populations then the racial identity of the person would not be as critical from my perspective.

What matters most is for the work to get done. Creating more socially just organizations and communities can only be accomplished when everyone takes the lead.

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