REFRAMING DEI

FROM AN INDIVIDUAL RESOURCE TO AN ORGANIZATIONAL VALUE

AN INTERVIEW WITH

SHERARD ROBBINS

ILLUME Founder and Co-Owner Anne Dougherty sits down with Sherard Robbins, Founder of Visceral Change, to talk candidly about diversity, equity, and inclusion and reflect on the hard truths of 2020.
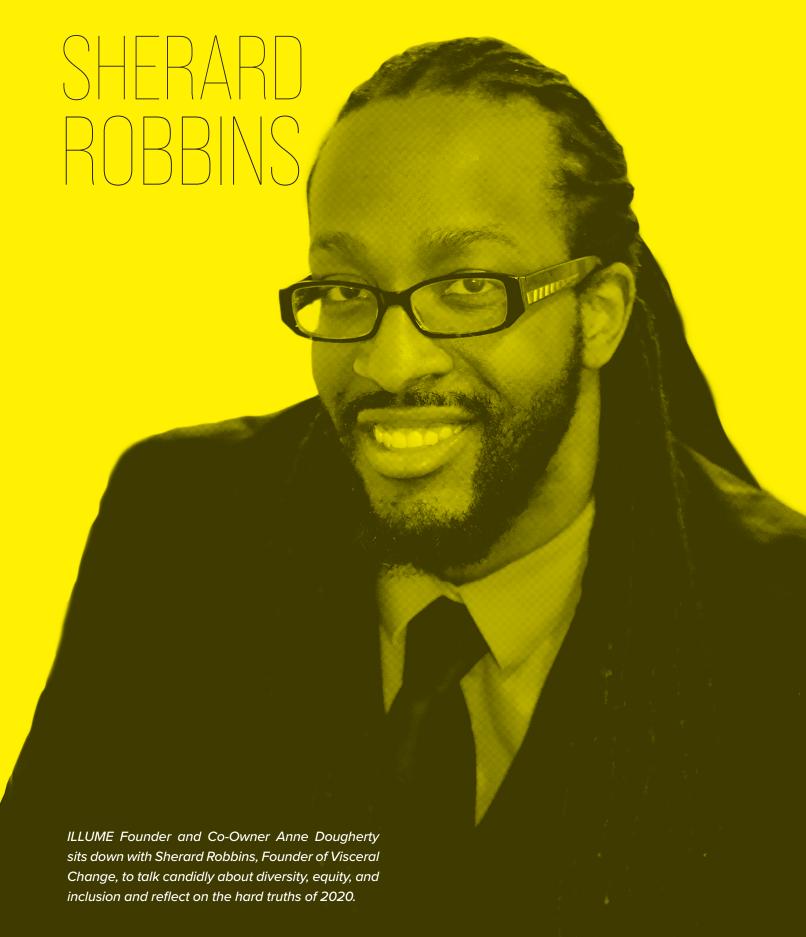
M ost of our conversations at the intersection of energy, climate, and communities of color focus on mitigating the disproportionate burdens placed on these communities. However, this approach continues to normalize the negative impacts on marginalized communities rather than forcing us to ask, "who benefits from the clean energy transition?"

Because our progress on racial and environmental justice is inextricably linked, we must reflect on what it means to be inclusive of Black, Indigenous, and marginalized communities as we work to democratize clean energy opportunities and solutions. A select few cannot mitigate climate change, nor should select communities disproportionately bear its brunt.

If we are committed to becoming better energy citizens, we must start with being better citizens to one another. In a year capped off by executive actions that deny discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion, how might we restart the difficult work of addressing our painful pasts and the ways our histories show up in our work?[1]

Anne Dougherty: Tell us about Visceral Change and how your approach to DEI work is different from others'.

Sherard Robbins: Visceral Change is an organizational development consultancy. We work with institutions and organizations to help them center their professional frameworks around diversity and inclusion. The elevator pitch is that we help organizations take their mission statement and a diversity statement and make them the same exact thing. The goal at the end of the day is to normalize diversity, equity, and inclusion in such a way where we begin to affect our mission: to move equity and inclusion from an individual resource to an organizational value.

What is unique about your organization?

SR: What separates us from other organizational development consultancies, but also other people who do the work of diversity and inclusion, is that our approach to the work is two-fold. First, we're a systems-focused organization (See Sidebar). Second, we're interested in each and every individual, but we're less interested in problematizing individual people, and more interested in problematizing the system.

Why is that important to you?

SR: There are people who do this work that problematize a person, that accurately identify some of the behaviors of white people, behaviors of men, hetero-normative behaviors as the problem—and that's correct. But without offering any recourse short of 'do your own homework,' we wind up hitting a wall. We try to get people to understand that it's not you who is the problem, inherently; it's your unchecked relationship to the system that's allowing you to behave in this way.

For those who may be skeptical of centering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their core mission, what argument do you have for why it is important to make sure to bring those two things together?

SR: It's an interesting question because we have elected US government officials suggesting that this type of work is divisive—which, to be clear, is absolutely not true; our material is not designed to be divisive at all. One of the most important takeaways to help those who are skeptical, is to understand that their overall organizational health, success, and longevity has everything to do with their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

You cannot maximize your potential as an organization, institution, or corporate entity without first tapping into the potential of your diversity. In order to effectively do that, you have to first understand where your diversity lies and then how to necessarily make that a part of your overall fabric and mission.

What is the most common 'Aha!' moment you see when clients start to dig into their mission and values with you?

SR: At the individual level, the 'Aha!' moment often comes when I explain that the concept of privilege, for example, is not innate or natural. The analogy I use is in reference to a diamond: when we think about a diamond, we think about an object that is shiny, beautiful, opulent, met with a level of grace. But when we actually think about it we recognize that a diamond is just a rock; it's pressurized carbon, a piece of the earth. Then the question becomes, 'Why didn't I think of that in the first place?' The answer is because we've been conditioned to understand that a diamond is associated with wealth. The 'Aha!' moment is that the same thing goes for all types of identities. That kind of privilege—whether it's whiteness, maleness, or able-bodiedness—these are just attributes of a person until a value is placed on them. That value is determined by societies with complex and often oppressive histories. That's why the title of my book is, 'A Diamond is a Diamond', because the idea is that a diamond is just a diamond until value is placed upon it.

Organizationally, the biggest issue facing DEI, social change, and social justice is the misunderstanding and the misuse of diversity, inclusion, and equity. The order of operations needs to be just that—D, then I, then E. The challenge is getting folks on board with that particular narrative. For me, that order of operations is the journey towards social justice, and when we operate outside of that order, we wind up in a position where we're requesting something that we're not actually prepared to develop within our organization.

What is the relationship between equity and power?

SR: I'm a big comic book guy and there is an old adage in Spider Man (and Superman) that we have all heard: 'With great power comes great responsibility.' I often bring this up in reference to the difference between privilege and social power. Social power has a lot to do with one's cachet or social capital, one's position and ability to really affect change. I can be privileged in a particular environment, but if I'm not the CEO, I don't have the same level of agency to control the narrative internally, regardless of what else I'm able to do with the other the privileges that I have in my life.

WHAT IS DEI?

Diversity refers to difference or variety of a particular identity. This framework focuses on race, but other markers of difference like gender and sexual orientation can be addressed as well. Diversity measures an entity's composition.[2]

Equity refers to resources and the need to provide additional or alternative resources so that all groups can reach comparable, favorable outcomes.[3]

Inclusion refers to internal practices, policies, and processes that shape an organization's culture. It speaks to how community members of a shared identity experience their environment.[4]

Source: The Greenlining Institute

How do we begin to contend with those dynamics?

SR: When we're working with equity and other elements of social justice, we're inherently making a commitment to upsetting the established order. This is important because there are people in the world who benefit from the way things are right now, and every discussion around social justice, environmental justice, and challenging the system is a threat to those who are doing well just the way things are. This encourages a lot of folks to not shake the tree too much. When we think about equity, we're thinking about fairness. Businesses tend to think about things in terms of policies and procedural approaches to DEI. Thus, we need to carefully assess how our organizations operate in ways that either promote or hinder DEI. When we really want things to be equitable, we want to take substantive action. We want that ink to dry on the dotted line, long term, essentially saying, This is no longer a temporary action item or goal: this is who we are and where we're going.

I think it's safer for a lot of CEOs and people who have access to power to keep things the way they are, so long as they are able to check quota boxes on diversity and inclusion. It's safer to continue to operate the way things are, which is part of the larger conversation: the misuse and misunderstanding of the three terms: diversity, equity, inclusion.

This challenges the notion of 'with great power....' You have to ask yourself, 'What is your responsibility, given your knowledge of the climate in your organization? Do you have a commitment to challenging the established order based on the language in your mission?' Truth is, you are not reflecting this particular commitment if you are not putting in the work. You are not exercising your agency and taking the responsibility, that ostensibly you should be taking, based on the goals you have set for yourself.

What do we need to do as organizations to push back against the stereotype that these conversations are divisive? What is our role in moving this work forward in the face of such actions?

SR: The role is to turn it up, keep going, and not quit. From a moral perspective, all areas of oppression win when those who are being oppressed do not push back, do not fight back. I say turn it up because there is strength in numbers. There are a lot of people who are battling the same types of challenges. The other thing that we want to do, though, is make sure that we're having discussions that are critical, that really problematize the oppressive identities and voices, and do not assume that that those who are oppressed are operating from a deficit.

Specific portions of my workshops are focused on anti-Blackness, not only to honor Black folks who have died, particularly George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, but to also critically examine whiteness. In order to really discuss anti-racism, or anti-Blackness, we have to discuss whiteness and center whiteness as the issue. This doesn't necessarily mean white people, but it is also absolutely white people because they benefit from the system if it remains unchecked, and even if it is checked.

For example, if I spent all my time understanding the challenges that Black folks have gone through, and the LGBT community has gone through, but I don't talk about why these challenges arise and then highlight the problem, we're only going to have a piece of the narrative. We'll continue to operate within a deficit model, focused on those who are oppressed by the dominant structure. We want to be able to push this in a way that challenges those identities doing the oppressing, so that we can have a productive, constructive conversation about how to actually dismantle the harmful narratives and practices that show up in our businesses.

When advising employers, how might employers engaged their team members, and in particular BIPOC and LGBTQ team members, without placing an undue burden on them, often referred to as the "minority tax?"

SR: The former Director of Diversity at Harvard University once said to me, 'You know, Sherard, we're talking about a complex issue here and I want to leave you with something: sometimes in order to bring the diversity, you have to be the diversity.' Over time, I've learned that this mindset adds to the taxation. But if you're not at that table neither are your views or the views of the people who look like you, nor the people you're best situated to support and advocate for. So sometimes to bring the diversity, you have to be the diversity.

For someone like me who understands this in a particular way, the effective message is: 'I appreciate that you asked me to sit on this committee. But I'm more appreciative if you're asking me not just so you can check a box, but with a strong attention to taking my word as value, and factor them into where we're going to move forward.'

One essential issue is representation. If I'm serving communities of color, but I'm an all-white organization, I'm missing a critical component to the strengths of what I can offer and what we're trying to accomplish here. People often ask, 'But we should hire the best person, right? Not the most diverse person?' Melody Hobson, former Fortune 500 CEO says, 'If the question is to hire the diverse person or the best person—the answer is yes.'

Visceral Change is an organizational development consultancy that works with institutions and organizations to help them center their professional frameworks around diversity and inclusion.

Learn more at www.visceralchange.org

THE SOCIOSYSTEMIC ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Sociosystemic Organizational Development (SsOD) advances Organizational Development (OD) and is the most comprehensive of OD theories.[5]

By evaluating excellence through sociosystemic design in addition to inclusion metrics, organizations commit to engaging in inclusion actively. Multicultural organizational development (MCOD) and Inclusive Excellence (IE) acknowledge that excellence can only be achieved through real inclusion, so organizations that address diversity as mere quota management cannot achieve meaningful multicultural inclusion. SsOD begins from the premise that one does not simply move to equity overnight.

Thus, the model is designed to correct the incomplete quota management narrative by imploring organizations to engage in self-examinations and to develop the cultural competence they'll need to transition through various stages of development.[6] stages of developmen

Source: Visceral Change