

# Joe Gerstandt: Investments tiny for workplace diversity

Joe Gerstandt, Guest essayist; 12:07 a.m. EDT March 26, 2014



I help organizations of all shapes and sizes find greater clarity about what diversity and inclusion actually are, how and why they matter, and then help put practices in place for greater benefits.

An interesting thing happens when I first visit an organization. One of my favorite things to do is to ask a random handful of employees and managers a few questions. What is diversity and inclusion, and why is it important, if at all?

What consistently happens, regardless of the geography, industry, type or size of the organization; if I ask ten different people these questions, I will get ten very different answers. Even in 2014, we believe we are having conversations about diversity, and we all use that word, yet everyone is talking about something different.

We have gotten very good in our organizations and communities about saying wonderful, profound and even poetic things about diversity and inclusion. Yet the actual investment of financial, social and political capital is often tiny. I challenge you to find another aspect of our organizations where there is a comparable disconnect between what we say and what we actually do.

Organization and community leaders are quick to say they are inclusive, yet often struggle to speak to the actions that they are taking to actually do that including.

I believe that there is a great deal of work to be done, and I think that the evidence is all around us.

The work needed to be done is not only beneficial to us as individuals, but also to our organizations, communities and institutions.

Diversity and inclusion work, properly understood, is about being better able to find, attract and engage the most talented people, regardless of their packaging. It is about a healthy, robust social process that fully utilizes the resources available.

It is about organizational and community cultures that are woven from a noisy mix of perspectives, identities, experiences and stories.

A big part of moving forward is the realization that we each have a role to play. Most conversations related to diversity and inclusion rest on a faulty foundation; this lingering binary idea that there are good people (or organizations) in the world which are without bias or judgment, and there are bad people (or organizations) in the world who are riddled with bias and judgment. So, the work is about finding the bad ones and fixing them.

This is what many people think that my work is about.

We know enough today about human beings, and specifically the human brain, to know that there is no such thing as an unbiased human being.

There is no hatred or fear required for you to have bias, to operate on assumptions, to jump to conclusions and judge people unfairly and incorrectly. These are all natural parts of the human experience, fear and hatred simply amplify them.

Each of us has work to do. Each of us contributes to the culture of the places where we live, work, play and worship, and can choose to help them become more inclusive.

Joe Gerstandt will speak at Rochester Institute of Technology on April 1. For more, or to register, go to [workforcediveristynet.com](http://workforcediveristynet.com).

This week's Nextpert Joe Gerstandt is a national diversity and inclusion advocate.