

On Clarity and Transparency

By Dr. Ronald Harris Parker

Two days that will forever be remembered in United State's history. The first was Monday, December 19, 2022 the only time a US President was criminally referred to the US Department of Justice. The second will be the day the US Department of Justice indicts that President.

But will the indictment really occur? More importantly, will we ever have clarity and transparency as to why the decision was made? Based on my experiences, the short answer is no as institutional patterns allow decisions to be made without clarity or transparency. Decisions without clarity and transparency are made daily in both government agencies and corporate America.

I'm a Baby Boomer, which means I can write cursive and drive a stick shift. I also spend part of the day wondering what scammers tell their children they do for a living.

I'm always searching for clarity and transparency as to how things actually occur. When someone tells me an abusive individual was fired from their job I want to know whether they were fired because of what they did or because they were caught.

Perhaps one of the reasons I search for these elements is that on May 4th 1970, a day I will always remember, I was a student at Kent State University. On that day I was an eyewitness to twenty-eight National Guard soldiers firing approximately 67 rounds of M-1 ammunition into a crowd of unarmed and peaceful students over a period of 13 seconds. The end result was the killing of four students and wounding of nine others.

A subsequent FBI investigation concluded that the Guard was not under fire and that the guardsmen fired the first shots- *Time* magazine stated "triggers were not pulled accidentally at Kent State." In the aftermath, the President's Commission on Campus Unrest found that "the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were "unnecessary, unwarranted and inexcusable."

Despite the overwhelming consensus, no one in the Guard was held accountable for their actions. Nor was there any information provided which displayed clarity and transparency as to why that decision was made. Explaining the why might have meant that other, more unfavorable, information would have had to be conveyed.

In my opinion, the disposition of the Kent State event represented an institutional indifference to clarity and transparency resulting in no accountability for the killings.

Today there are many examples of the same institutional indifference about clarity and transparency. Presently, in corporate America, sexual harassment is a daily issue. The majority of women in the work place will tell you that they have received unwanted sexual advances or experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.

So why is sexual harassment so pervasive and so hard to address? How seriously do companies take sexual harassment? Truth is the full scope of sexual harassment is unknown, as companies don't publicly disclose internal harassment data.

So my question for all companies out there that have a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment is how many individuals accused of sexual harassment are not disciplined? How many women in the workplace feel sexualized and diminished and are fearful about speaking up? Until clarity and transparency about sexual harassment is provided, toxic work environments will continue to thrive.

The most striking example of institutional indifference to clarity and transparency is gender inequality. In spite of claims otherwise, men and women are not treated equally in corporate America nor are they on a path to gender equality.

Women are underrepresented at all levels within corporate America and face greater barriers to advancement and a steeper path to senior management.

- Is that because there are more men than women? No
- Is that because men possess more education than men? No
- Is that because men possess greater competencies than women? No

Why the discrepancy?

As a young, untenured college professor in 1988, I, along with a woman colleague, completed a two-year research project on women in corporate management positions. We sought to understand the reasons for their underrepresentation.

The findings of our research showed that men and women, operating at comparable managerial levels, were not reading the work environment in the same way. They were not interpreting advancement, or the requirements to achieve it, in the same way. Neither the men nor the women had clarity and transparency and could articulate what it took to reach the top.

These findings suggested to us that organizations needed to better define and clarify the “rules of the game” so that everyone who wanted to advance had the opportunity to do so. We wrote in 1988, “If we are pursuing equal employment opportunity, then maybe we have placed the cart before the horse. That is, prior to implementing affirmative action programs, sensitivity training for supervisors, or career development for women, organizations should first define what is necessary for promotion.”

Today, thirty-five years later we have the same issues. There is still nothing definitive as to what combination of experience in core business areas, specific skills, knowledge and ability are required to perform a role in management or senior management.

So without clarity and transparency of selection criteria, how can selection decisions be scrutinized? How can hiring managers be held accountable for their selection decisions? The short answer is they can’t and nothing in future suggests they ever will.

Without selection criteria being defined why would anyone expect that a male dominated executive management team would have a sense of urgency to change the present promotional system? Fact is that by questioning the legitimacy of promotional systems currently in place, it might delegitimize their positions and how they attained it. Why would they do that? The short answer is they won’t nor will they because nothing requires them to do so.

Summary

I recognize that some organizations strive for clarity and transparency. Their leadership embraces open communication by explaining what is being done and why it's being done. This same leadership group keeps employees current on progress towards these new initiatives. The problem is that most companies are not like this.

Most organizations today have structures that make it difficult to incorporate people from outside their circle into their decision-making process. People are not aware of what the organization is doing and why it's doing it. At the same time, this clarity and transparency have become the expectation of our present workforce. These circumstances give rise to distrust and misunderstanding and without clarity and transparency these issues are worsened.

What will be the reasons why the former President is indicted or not indicted?

If the students at Kent State did not pose a safety issue to the Guardsmen, why was there no consequence for their behaviors?

Why must women accept abuse or bullying in the workplace as normal?

Why must women face barriers to upward mobility?

Our present practice and culture within government and corporate America allows these questions to go unanswered even though certain people know the answers. This fact coupled with power not being watched is a dangerous situation subject to daily abuse.

Dr. Ronald Harris Parker is a 1972 graduate of Kent State University. Presently he is a thoroughbred breeder/owner and engages in selected practice and culture consulting assignments. During his career, spanning fifty-one years, he was a tenured college Professor of Management, and served in Executive Management roles in several organizations where he directed Operations, Human Resources and Best Practices.

