

The Roots of White Male Culture: From the British Isles Through the American Prairie to the Boardroom

by Bill Proudman

For corporations and firms that are committed to a diverse workforce, recognizing and celebrating multiculturalism is a common theme. The U.S. has long been thought of as a melting pot of cultures with people emigrating here from all over the globe. Many cultures have and continue to influence the American way. But a meaningful examination of culture in the U.S. can be both complex and difficult.

But there's one culture that's so pervasive it's often invisible, even to those who rarely if ever have to leave it: the white male culture. Like fish unaware of water, most white men respond, "What culture?" when the topic is raised. But just as Asian respect for elders can be traced to their reverence of their ancestors, white male culture (the dominant culture at the foundation of most U.S.-based organizations) can be traced to the environmental influences of European white men struggling to leave the British Isles and survive in the Colonies. This historical can-do individualism pervades the American workforce to such an extent that its roots are imperceptible, and some of its fiercest defenders can be non-white men who see it as "the way things get done."

The intent of this article is to shine light on white male culture, the dominant culture in the U.S. as well as the prevailing culture of most U.S.-based organizations. Because the norm is almost

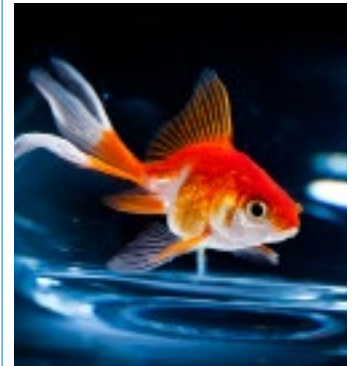
never examined, this article looks at the various aspects of white male culture in America. The next article in the series will address the impact this culture has on white women, people of color, and other white men. But before we examine the impact, let's look at what makes up white male culture.

The "norm" goes largely unexamined in most systems. What often gets examined and reexamined are the exceptions to the norm. An examination of white male culture can be awkward and difficult because the culture is rarely called anything other than "American culture" or "the way things are."

One of the characteristics of white male culture is a low tolerance for ambiguity. One of the by-products of this low tolerance is often to view issues from a place of either/or rather than and/both. When culture in the U.S. is examined from a place of either/or and the focus is white male culture, it is easy to interpret this examination as a diminishing of other cultures and its influence on shaping corporate culture or as a bashing of white men. The intent of this article is neither of the above. Instead, I invite a thoughtful examination of the parts of white male culture that largely go unexamined.

Despite its pervasiveness, it's important to examine the roots and characteristics of white male culture, not only for white

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men but also for those who work with them. This closer examination can help White Men to deepen awareness and understanding, leading to a heightened effectiveness when partnering across differences at work as well as more productive work relationships and stronger business results. This examination does require the acceptance of a few ground rules. First, this is not an attempt to better understand individual white men; no one person defines a culture, and no broad cultural description can define an individual. Second, the characteristics of a culture are neither good nor bad. Cultural norms are the unspoken ways to which people are generally expected to conform. Third, it is generally accepted that a person's aptitude and ease in navigating organizational culture are contributing factors to advancement and satisfaction.

WHITE MEN AS BOTH INDIVIDUALS AND MEMBERS OF A SOCIAL IDENTITY GROUP

American white men don't typically view themselves as members of the white male group, or any group, but as unique individuals. Culture is something other people have. The notion of being part of a white male social-identity group is a strange new proposition—one that is hard to swallow, given the fierce attachment to individual identity. Furthermore, many white men fear that a closer look is for the purpose of assigning criticism or blame.

Yet as long as white men don't accept their membership in the group, they will often be unable to see how traits of white male culture affect white women, and men and women of color, as well as themselves. These traits have become virtually interchangeable with corporate America, making white

women and men and women of color subject to the same definitions of success and self-worth that define life for white men whether or not they agree or choose to accept those definitions. As you examine the following characteristics of white male culture, feel free to accept or challenge them. Your consideration of the issue will help to frame your understanding and curiosity of the impact of the white male culture on organizations and people in the U.S. This understanding can be key in creating workplace cultures of inclusion.

ROOTS IN THE BRITISH ISLES

An understanding of current American white male culture starts in the British Isles. While not all white males are English, much of northern European culture, particularly in its influence on the U.S., can be traced here.

English history shows how today's white men (and others through assimilation) have been battle tested through the centuries. Early existence in England consisted of fighting nature and invasions. A cold, wet climate, poor soil, and disease made scarcity the daily reality. Constant wars with invaders fostered distrust of outsiders. These experiences led to feudal classism, where hero-leaders were responsible for safeguarding their people.

Because there was little wealth to pass on, White Men inheritance went to the eldest son only. Younger sons were forced to go into the world to make something of themselves, creating the seeds for the tenure system, the development of business, and the brotherhood of the military. These conditions led the English to spread out to the rest of the world. There, innovation



helped them survive. Still, constant fear of invasion had stamped the English worldview, and the result can still be seen today.

KEY WHITE MALE CULTURE CHARACTERISTICS

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Studying the relationship between white male culture and the history of the British Isles can help American white men see which traits—traits that ensured their ancestors' survival—live on in them today. These traits include:

- Survivor mentality that focuses on the future
- A tendency to rugged individualism
- A can-do attitude
- Operating from principles and conscience
- Focus on hard work, action, and task completion
- Striving toward success and materialism
- Measured moderation and silent strength
- Focus on status and rank over connection.

SURVIVORS WITH A FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Many ancestors of today's American white men crossed the Atlantic because their prospects were so bleak that forging out to unknown America was more promising. Some were fleeing religious or class persecution; others simply couldn't scratch a living from the landscape.

Persecution distanced many settlers from their family roots by prompting them to change their surname and create a new identity. By doing so, white-male pioneers created a culture in which each was judged by his own abilities, not by his class (as long as he was white and male), and only the strong survived.

This survivor mentality persists in a fixation with rigid either/or thinking. White male culture defines engagements through opposition and ultimatum and values winners above all. As their ancestors fled from persecution, today's white male culture often divides people into groups of us vs. them, resulting in the mindset of: "You're either with us or against us."

A TENDENCY TO RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM

Pioneer survival carries forward to the culture's heavy focus on individual achievement. No matter how successful one's family, a white man is expected to make something of himself on his own, to stand on his own two feet. (Today, because the culture is so pervasive, young people of both sexes hear this message.) Men who use a family name for success are scorned, and none are more celebrated than those who "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps," going from poverty to financial and personal success.

Individuality was a value sacred to the new America; it birthed the Bill of Rights and the separation of church and state. American innovation and entrepreneurship were largely born from protections for the individual over the institution.

This individualism keeps many white men from discovering the value of ancestral ties that others (especially

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non-whites) hold central to their identity. Not acknowledging their own culture, and differences in general, leads many white men to disregard skin color and gender. Their attitude is to “just treat everyone the same.” All too often, this means others should, in fact, act the same—the same as the dominant white male culture.

A CAN-DO ATTITUDE

White male culture is a can-do culture. Trace it to the constant battles of English forbearers against Mother Nature. It’s also linked to the way victors are supposed to contain their glee when they succeed. Keeping cool after good outcomes plays to the notion that success is an expected by-product of the can-do attitude, while gloating may suggest it was uncertain.

Today, these can-do roots reach into other realms, such as affirmative action—an engineered fix to a problem with deep, complex causes. Can-do helps create an “act first, think later” tendency that has led to spectacular results and tragic missteps. The culture believes so deeply that anything is possible for those who just try hard enough, that it is hard-pressed to deal with people who don’t succeed in this paradigm.

OPERATING FROM PRINCIPLES AND CONSCIENCE

The white male culture is deeply rooted in the notion of acting from principle and conscience. It is considered worthy to take a stand based on a set of personally cherished principles, as evidenced by the nation’s robust protections of free speech, open expression, and the right to bear arms. Legends and pop culture celebrate stories of the individual speaking out—against overwhelming odds—to make a difference in the larger society. Ac-

ording to this creed, the white man acts alone, as necessary, to speak his truth.

FOCUS ON HARD WORK, ACTION AND TASK COMPLETION

Puritan and Calvinist ancestors cultivated a work ethic in which activity bears a near-moral virtue. Many white males find their identity in the projects they are building, rather than in their relationships or their essential sense of being.

Today’s organizations manifest the same priority by not permitting workers time to relax or reflect. The push to stay competitive against other companies working equally hard keeps business moving ever faster. And under free-market capitalism, the carrot is the material reward in the here-and-now. That lure is powerful enough to keep employees at their desks for long hours, eager to attain the success spelled by a luxury car or bigger house.

STRIVING FOR SUCCESS AND MATERIALISM

America is obsessed with the new—whatever the product or purpose. This hunger for the bigger and better has contributed to (among other signs of national ill health) the massive amount of U.S. credit card debt.

In the book *The Stuff Americans Are Made Of* by Joshua Hammond, the author paints this driving force in the following terms: “Our freedom of choice allows us to tackle an ‘impossible’ dream that is bigger than anything we’ve done before; we want to achieve it now but fail in our initial attempts; we try again and through some form of improvisation succeed, only to wonder what’s new so that we can start all over and make another choice.”

MEASURED MODERATION AND SILENT STRENGTH

Probably more than anything else, the white male cultural trait of emotional moderation and restraint continues to define the group. White Men Can't Jump, the title of a popular film, could easily be extended to cover singing, dancing, laughing, and any kind of emoting. What can white men do? Work hard, keep a stiff upper lip, and don't complain.

White men have been conditioned to think of themselves as quiet, hardworking doers who forgo the spotlight. And organizational cultures mirror this need to be rationally purposeful, hardworking contributors who make things happen. This atmosphere of measured restraint has infected not just white men, but all people seeking to thrive in corporate America.

FOCUS ON STATUS AND RANK OVER CONNECTION

Success in white male terms is often linked to evaluating one's place in the hierarchy. Power and success is derived from a person's organizational status and positional rank. The higher the individual's position, the more status the person has.

Corporate culture in the U.S. is heavily influenced and affected by status and rank. Thus, the natural consequence is to have those who don't fit the in-group norm (people of color, gays/lesbians, women, and non-Christians, etc.) placed in a lesser position. Despite all good interactions, it's impossible to deny that this unchecked dynamic is still embedded within individual interactions in the workplace. Often its subtle effect is devastating to those on the receiving end.

Issues like dress, educational background, manner of expression, and even where a person sits in a meeting are used to various degrees to determine if a person is "management material," and to establish if a person fits the organization's way or culture upon making hiring decisions. For example, are white men ever judged as a result of sitting together in a meeting? This examination itself is not bad; what is problematic is that success indicators are often limited to the attributes that define white male culture. Many performance measurement systems are slightly modified vestiges of the characteristics of white male culture.

Status and rank have also been systemically ingrained in many corporate structures and practices. Systems are set in place that routinely deny advancement opportunities to individuals and groups who don't automatically fit the norm. This can lead to a rash of class action lawsuits related to gender, race, and other forms of discrimination.

On a person-to-person basis, this focus on status and rank lessens the quality and depth of relationships. Being one-up takes on more importance than whether an interaction draws people closer together. The upside is that roles tend to be clear and work flows through the chain of command. The downside is that qualities such as collaboration, intuition, and empathy can be devalued and belittled.

What might our world look like if we spent less time conforming to the mostly invisible behavioral norms of white male culture? What would it be like if we could express all parts of ourselves?



A LIFELONG DISCOVERY

None of the traits described here are automatically negative. But collectively they create a thick web of what's expected of white males and, by association, everyone else. As a result, all people are measured against a white male standard of organizational worth and contribution. Identifying these standards is not an effort to sanction or proscribe individual behavior. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the origins of corporate expectations for success and dedication in order to create environments where everyone is allowed to more fully explore unique characteristics and contribute in meaningful ways.

This change is not a one-time alteration, but a lifelong process of discovery. And it's important to tease out the self-interest inherent in this investigation. What might our world look like if we spent less time conforming to the mostly invisible behavioral norms of white male culture? What would it be like if we could express all parts of ourselves?

As we forge new ways of being and working together, I believe it will be extremely valuable to individuals, organizations, communities, and the world to find out.

The Fish Must See the Water: Helping Men See Their Own Culture

by Bill Proudman

he room is still as people around the circle lean forward to listen. Quiet moans and twitches of discomfort float about as a woman recounts her story. Among her flowing tears and deep pain are the fragments of an experience from childhood when she was denied use of a public drinking fountain. The fountain was off limits, marked “For Whites Only.”

Inside, my heart grew heavy. I felt paralyzed as I heard this story of oppression. I knew of our country’s segregated history, but it never felt as real as it became that moment. Why had it not been real before? I don’t remember the details of her story. What I carry is the depth of pain this colleague held. It is one of a few key experiences in my life that catalyzed my transformative journey toward advocating inclusion and equity.

In my colleague’s story, the oppression was overt, the fountain clearly marked with a printed sign. Harder to grasp are the more subtle ways in which discrimination continues, fed by passivity, fear, and avoidance. As often as I have successfully confronted discrimination or participated in open dialogues around diversity issues, I can also recall feeling too hesitant to confront or too scared to talk openly about touchy issues. Diversity challenges me, like many things in life. It brings forth my strongest and weakest parts. Embracing diversity thus means dancing with my own shadow. I am glad, because this is one of the more significant dances in my ongoing process of growth. Some of the most important lessons I’ve learned have centered on the touchy topic of white males and diversity. The media has focused on the worry, anger and resentment of white males. However, while I have found my journey to

be painful at times, I have also found the pathway toward diversity to contain priceless treasures. Writing about white males is tricky for several reasons. We often resist seeing ourselves as a group. We see women, people of color and others as groups, but we tend to see ourselves only as individuals. We need to transcend the “either/or” question. We are both individuals and members of the white male group. We must look at both realities to comprehend and respond to issues around diversity. Others see us as a group, so we must too, in order to understand their reality.

A second challenge is that acknowledging our membership in the white male group can seem to imply denying other differences such as class, religion, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity within the white male group. But again—transcending the either/or question—we are a white male group and there are differences that split white males. To understand issues of diversity, we must move from either/or to “both/and” logic. I am both white male and American born, heterosexual, in my mid-30s, raised Catholic, upper-middle class, able-bodied, mixed northern-European heritage, and introverted. My writing about white males is oriented toward my membership in these categories as well. White males with other backgrounds will have different experiences. Acknowledging the white male group, collectively and with individual differences, is one part of the whole puzzle and is a critical piece often overlooked.

DIVERSITY IS ONLY HALF THE PICTURE

As a high school senior, I spent a summer with a family in northern Germany. What

We tend to hire and promote those who share similar behaviors and traits, thus reinforcing the norm (these male-associated behaviors)

struck me most was how similar we were to each other. The similarities put the differences into perspective. Difference and sameness are a polarity with each being defined in part by the other. Barry Johnson illuminates polarity dynamics in *Polarity Management*. He explains the paradox that in order to gain the benefits of one pole, you must also pursue the benefits of the other. To stimulate reflection, I often ask people: If you were stranded on a desert island, would you rather be with twelve people exactly like you or twelve people who are totally different? Most people recognize they'd want people with totally different skills and resources. But in reality you would want both similarities and differences. Things like a common language would be helpful. In this hypothetical situation you would have something else in common, a goal to survive. To understand diversity, you have to involve something at the other end of the pole, like unity or community.

My explorations of diversity throughout the world have always been informed by the commonality of the human family. Seeing a smile or hearing a deep chuckle from a co-worker in South Africa served to bridge the gaps of language, race, generation, and many other differences. Wisdom comes from seeking insights into both similarities and differences and recognizing that both are always present in some way. To do this I must know myself, my culture, and my motives, since it is easy to erroneously project similarity onto those things I like and difference onto those things I don't like.

LEARNING OUR WHITE MALE CULTURE

Knowing our own culture, and thus