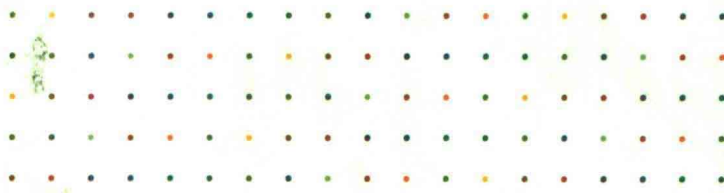Getting Past Face Value and
Finding the Soul of People
—*A Manager's Journey*

progressive diversity

PROVERSITY

Lawrence Otis Graham

author of **MEMBER OF THE CLUB**

PROVERSITY™

Getting Past Face Value and
Finding the Soul of People
—A Manager's Journey

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INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, I was working as a corporate attorney in one of the largest law firms in New York City while simultaneously completing research on a book that surveyed the employment practices of the most respected corporations in the Fortune 1000. It was during that time that I received the biggest lesson of my life on the hidden barriers that exist for so many people in corporate America.

One of these barriers is called *Passive Bias,* a term that I coined. I discovered this phenomenon when, as a part of my book research, I took a leave of absence from my law firm job, disguised my resume, and began working undercover as a busboy at an all-white Connecticut country club that discriminated against blacks, women, Jews, Asians, Hispanics, and others.

My experience in this Connecticut club was a disturbing one—not because it revealed how the club world keeps minorities, women, and others off the golf course and outside an environment of powerful

networks. It was disturbing because there I saw some of the most prominent executives in corporate America spend Saturday and Sunday at an institution that they knew actively discriminated on the grounds of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion, yet they arrived at work Monday morning operating under the notion that they could fairly hire, manage, and evaluate their employees on a color-blind, gender-blind, religion-blind basis.

The fact that this practice went on—and continues to go on—in many parts of the country, unchallenged, told me that either there are great numbers of "schizophrenic" managers who honestly believe they can be weekend bigots, and then transform themselves into open-minded team builders in the workplace, or that many managers and employees working in our organizations are simply unaware of the bias that they, themselves, adopt and practice.

Recognizing that the decision to erase deeply held, biased attitudes about others lies with the individual, I wrote this book to offer a new approach to addressing "diversity" in organizations and the customers they serve.

Whether you are a part of a large corporation, a governmental agency, a nonprofit group, an educational institution, or a small business, you certainly have recognized how much the marketplace around you has changed. But you may have been blindsided, victimized, or confused by the debate over embracing diversity and celebrating differences.

After four years of research on managing diverse organizations and working with managers at all tenure

levels through my consulting firm, Progressive Management Associates, Inc., I have discovered that organizations have been misplacing their resources as they adapt to new human resources challenges. Rather than focusing on the diversity—or differences—among workers, they should instead adapt a more unifying approach and focus on *Proversity,* the characteristics that people in their organizations have *in common. Proversity* is quite simply Progressive Diversity:

Proversity™ \ *noun* **1.** progressive diversity: the product of bringing together individuals who appear different, but who have many common characteristics. **2.** a more advanced and progressive form of diversity planning. **3.** a description of individuals who look different on the exterior, but are actually quite similar. **4.** the condition of having similar characteristics on a deep level in spite of existing surface characteristics that look different.

I wrote this book for managers and organizations who are trying to remain both competitive and responsible in the face of four major challenges:

1. A pressure to serve increasingly diverse customers.
2. A need to hire and train diverse workers.
3. A desire to address the ongoing reversal of affirmative action policies.
4. The urge to build a cohesive organization in spite of these changes.

Organizations are more likely to succeed at addressing these four challenges once they are able to teach their workers to conduct themselves as Progressive Managers.

I use the term *Progressive Manager*™ to describe any employee or worker who adopts Proversity strategies and recognizes that the best managers are those who look beyond what is different about themselves, their coworkers and consumers, and who attempt to find the goals and interests that they all have in common. The Progressive Manager understands that an organization's success can be threatened by those employees who practice any type of *passive bias*— bigotry that seems benign and that is not intended to harm or insult others.

I have coined the terms *passive bias* and *Proversity* to help the Progressive Manager find his or her own strengths while also inspiring coworkers to find theirs.

I wrote this book in the format of a story—a story of a young manager who is probably not very different from people we have met in our own organizations.

As you get to know Percy McGee, this average manager in an average American company, and follow him through his experiences and interactions with coworkers and others, you will see how Progressive Managers get their workers to overcome passive bias in the workplace and use the power of Proversity to become more productive and more successful in this increasingly changing world. I believe we can all benefit from the lessons that Percy McGee learns in these pages.

CONTENTS

Contents

PART THREE
IMPLEMENTING THE POWER OF PROVERSITY

AN ORGANIZATION WITH PASSIVE BIAS

1

Those Were
the Days

"What happened to the way things used to be?"

This was the question that was always on the mind of Percy McGee. As he sat in his corner office looking out into the hallway beyond his secretary's desk, he thought about how much his company, his department—even his floor—had changed since he arrived fourteen years ago.

Moving his way up through the entry-level and middle-level management ranks of the 99-year-old National Flashlight Company (NFC) was a challenge that Percy had enjoyed meeting. As Vice President of Domestic Marketing, he was becoming a respected and valued executive, and was finally catching the eye of the CEO. He felt it was just a

matter of time before he would be tapped for a senior executive spot at NFC; he was sure they were grooming him for that.

As Percy considered his status in the organization—a business with operations in nine countries—he stared up at the company logo statuette sitting on his desk: a one-and-a-half-foot high bald eagle with outstretched wings—one of the most patriotic symbols of America. Some said that there was something anachronistic about the NFC company statue—a brass bald eagle perched next to a primitive torch with the company's motto hanging across the statue's base: National Flashlight Company: Lighting Our Nation From Sea to Shining Sea.

While Percy felt that the American Bald Eagle and the company motto paid appropriate respect to NFC's American roots, some thought it missed the point, particularly since the $2.4 billion business had long been a multinational corporation. The nationalistic symbols clearly needed some reworking. In fact, during recent years, several of the new marketing executives and even outside vendors suggested that the large and awkward statue be redesigned to include a new motto and symbol that better reflected NFC's international presence. In spite of the criticisms, the statue seemed just fine to Percy, and it maintained a prominent place on his desk.

Although he was a young manager, he was like some of NFC's older executives who found comfort in holding onto NFC's past. For them, it

was the all-American company with the all-American heritage. Like them, Percy saw value in nostalgia, and the NFC eagle statue was a part of that nostalgia. "Even if it does seem flawed today," Percy often said, "we shouldn't be going around altering things that our company's founders created. Let's act with moderation and try to leave things as they are."

In fact, that was Percy's response to many of the suggestions that were being offered by the newer vendors and managers who worked with or joined the company. He often recoiled at their suggestions on how NFC should pursue its marketing or other strategies. To him, their progressive strategies seemed radical and unrealistic. And to thwart these potential changes, he responded to new workers and new ideas with that same answer, "Let's act with moderation and try to leave things as they are."

NFC had been a good company for Percy, and he saw no reason to change the organization or the way it was run. In fact, he believed that it was NFC's resistance to industry fads and fickle consumer behavior that had made it possible for the company to outlast its competitors for so many years. And no one was a better chronicler of NFC's history than Percy.

In fact, Percy's ties to the company dated back to when he was a 12-year-old Boy Scout. His scoutmaster had given each new troop member an NFC "Eagle Eye" flashlight, and even today,

twenty-eight years later, that metal flashlight sat on Percy's desk.

Percy was devastated when the company discontinued the "Eagle Eye" model design three years ago. "That light has been around forever," he complained, "and I see no reason to change the design."

NFC had been a good company and he saw no reason to change it.

And that was Percy's attitude today about NFC: The way that things used to be was the way things ought to be. And why would anyone be surprised that he felt this way? Anyone could see that Percy had lived a pleasant and stable life with little turmoil, and virtually no changes or surprises. He had been the all-American kid, who had developed all-American aspirations. He had worked his way into a top manager's job at the all-American company.

But even with all his personal success, the young manager was beginning to sense that something was going wrong with the company around him. He was perfectly content with his own department's success, but what made him uneasy was what went on outside his office. Things didn't seem normal anymore and they made him feel more uneasy each year—particularly as he began

to see how his employer was expanding and changing.

As he looked up from the eagle statuette and out into the hallway shaking his head, he ran his hand across the spiral-bound sales reports on his desk and whispered to himself, "What happened to the way things used to be?"

During the past two years, Percy had asked himself that question so many times, he could sometimes think of nothing else. Whether sitting through department meetings, walking through the company cafeteria or even just riding the elevator up to his office, he found himself asking the same question, "What happened to the way things used to be?" As he saw new people coming into the company, new policies implemented by personnel, new people appearing in company advertisements, and even new rules for the support staff's dress code, he wondered why things had to keep changing.

He thought about the old NFC and all the things that he had liked about it:

- He thought of Sammy, the elderly black man who was contracted by NFC to walk the halls every Monday and Thursday, offering shoe shines to the employees who sat at their desks. Even when sitting in his leather desk chair talking on the phone or running a meeting,

Percy could count on the good-natured Sammy to work diligently and quietly on his knees without disturbing the conversation or interrupting Percy's train of thought. But shoe shine visits were eliminated after several of the new black employees complained that Sammy's role created a demeaning and racist atmosphere.

- He thought of the old executive dining room that was reserved for any manager with a title of Director or above. Percy liked the idea of not having to eat alongside clerical staff, entry-level workers, and others who had been relegated to the larger and noisier company cafeteria. But the executive dining room had been closed four years ago after a "quality of life" committee had performed a cultural audit and declared that separate lunchrooms gave rise to elitist attitudes in the office.

- He thought of the color-coordinated uniform smocks that certain members of the support staff used to wear at the office. Mailroom people had blue smocks, photocopy staff wore green, internal messengers wore red, cleaning staff wore white, security workers wore brown, and fax room staff wore black. Percy had liked the system because it relieved him from having to remember faces or names. The CEO eliminated the uniforms

8