When former President Barack Obama was born in 1961, he entered into one of the most diverse family environments one could ever have. His mother was white and from Kansas. Her immediate and past relatives were mostly of English descent with ancestry from German, Irish, Scottish, Swiss and Welsh. His father was black and from Kenya. He was part of the Luo ethnic group with roots that extended through Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

“My father looked nothing like the people around me,” Obama said, noting his parents met in a Russian-language class. “My father was black as pitch, my mother white as milk.” (It bears mentioning this African and American couple met in a Russian-language class in Hawaii.)

Later, Obama’s mother married Lolo Soetoro Mangunharjo and Obama spent a portion of his childhood years growing up in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim majority country in the world. As for Obama’s faith, he is a Christian, but his world growing up included a family that ran the gamut from Christianity to Islam to atheism. It is not surprising the former president refers to his childhood experience as “a mini-little United Nations.”

With a personal life that deeply imbued him with a diverse and inclusive mindset, it is not surprising Obama’s public life reflected it.

“For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness,” he said during his inaugural address on Jan. 21, 2009. “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth.”

Setting the country’s tone of inclusion

It is commonly known in organizational theory that it is the leader who sets the “tone and culture” of a group. The top individual tends to be personified in an organization. And so it was with Obama. Just 31 months after he told the nation “our patchwork heritage is a strength,” the former president issued one of the most important diversity and inclusion measures in the history of the U.S.
On Aug. 18, 2011, during an unusually hot period in the District of Columbia, Obama signed an executive order that was not really considered major news. In many ways, given the president’s race and background, many said “it was expected.” Today, however, although relatively few know of its existence, Executive Order 13583 has impacted the public and private sectors and caused tremors that reverberate to this day. Even with a new administration and new ways of governing, millions of federal employees, hundreds of government agencies, businesses and nonprofits throughout the U.S. are, mostly unwittingly, experiencing the effect of the order.

Plainly stated, the order mandates “a coordinated government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the federal workforce.” The purpose is to promote the federal government as “a model” of equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion nationwide.

“Our nation derives strength from the diversity of its population and from its commitment to equal opportunity for all,” Obama wrote. “We are at our best when we draw on the talents of all parts of our society, and our greatest accomplishments are achieved when diverse perspectives are brought to bear to overcome our greatest challenges. A commitment to equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion is critical for the federal government as an employer.”

Diversity in corrections

Because executive orders issued by the president of the U.S. have the force of law, they can and do affect policy and expectations globally. If not by their very edict, then at least by their words, executive orders are viewed as some of the most effective tools to set the “tone and culture” in a...
system-wide, far-reaching manner. One of the federal government entities affected heavily by Obama’s words was the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), a federal executive department which administers numerous justice and law enforcement agencies. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is a division of DOJ and one of its most important law enforcement agencies.

With an annual budget of more than $7 billion, nearly 40,000 employees, and a guiding motto of “Correctional Excellence, Respect and Integrity,” clearly, what happens in this Washington-based agency can have important influence in corrections nationwide and the government in general. Case in point, it was DOJ, and BOP indirectly, which led the way for Obama’s original 2011 diversity and inclusion decree.

In general, referred to as Obama’s “heat shield,” former Attorney General Eric Holder issued a Diversity Management Plan one year prior to the former president’s executive order. Holder’s focus was a similar prelude to Obama’s: to recruit, hire and retain, and offer professional development. Holder said he based it on his experiences as attorney general and as a long-time DOJ career employee.

“The Department of Justice employs more than 115,000 talented and diverse women and men to help meet its mission and goals. We are stronger, more credible, and more effective when our workforce includes highly qualified individuals with backgrounds, cultures and traditions that reflect our nation’s rich diversity,” Holder later stated in DOJ’s Diversity Management Policy Statement in 2014. “We value diversity in our workforce and embrace the cultural and demographic dimensions of our country. We work diligently to attract and retain a workforce that represents the range of personal and professional backgrounds, and experiences and perspectives that arise from differences of culture and circumstances. This includes persons of varying age, ethnicity, gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, political affiliation, socioeconomic and family status, and geographic region.”

In both his remarks that launched DOJ’s initial diversity plan in 2010 and his later remarks, Holder captured (or attempted to capture) all that diversity and inclusion represent. Diversity is the spectrum of human differences, including race, religion, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical ability, physical appearance, political beliefs, ways of thinking and more.

Inclusion is “involvement and empowerment.” It brings value, respect and appreciation to diversity. It is when people are in an environment that allows them to bring their “total selves to the table.”

Most would agree, given diversity’s encompassing definition, the field of corrections and correctional facilities, both in the public and private sectors, are full of diversity. (If nothing else, just imagine the many different ways individuals in corrections problem-solve.) Whenever two or more humans are gathered, you will find diversity. There are big questions at diversity’s table: Do we always have inclusion? Is my involvement welcome? Are you empowered to be fully you?

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Inclusion is so important that one of the core values of BOP, posted boldly on its website, speaks directly to inclusion without using the word. “We embrace diversity and recognize the value and dignity of staff, inmates and the general public.”

This BOP statement, taken alone, when fully embraced, has the potential to enhance and improve the corrections profession and correctional facilities everywhere. Many say, because of organizations like the American Correctional Association, “diversity and inclusion” thinking is already in place and continues to permeate, for the good of all, throughout the system.

This is great news and bodes well for the future of corrections. Few professionals want to go backward
and not have diversity and inclusion at the table together. Instead, most want to fully embrace past lessons-learned and move forward to a wiser future.

One particular lesson that took place more than 45 years ago was painful to learn, but it stands as a great example of what happens when diversity and inclusion are not present together.

**When diversity is missing: Attica**

In 1971, when a riot took place at Attica Correctional Facility in Western New York and inmates clashed with state troopers, the words “diversity and inclusion” were probably not on anyone’s mind. Too bad. Because when all the smoke cleared and the situation was examined for what it truly was, “diversity and inclusion” were the critical missing elements that could have averted the tragedy completely.

When there is no respect, value or appreciation for the differences we all represent; when “persons” become “categories”; and when situations become “them” against “us,” decency and humanity take a back seat and the worst can happen. Things like tolerance and cultural understanding never see the light of day.

An August 2000 report titled, “Racial Diversity of Correctional Workers and Inmates: Organizational Commitment, Teamwork and Worker Efficacy in Prisons” concluded that cultural differences and lack of understanding among the correctional force were cited as primary grievances among rioting prisoners. The report further revealed that subsequent investigations confirmed that these issues were indeed a precipitating factor in the riot and a legitimate problem in the management of prisons.

Diversity and inclusion, together, could have produced respect and dialogue, instead of racial epithets, bullets and unnecessary deaths. Did diversity exist at Attica? If you consider the fact that the prisoners were black and Hispanic and the staff supervising the prisoners was primarily white and rural, the answer is a resounding “yes.” On the other hand, inclusion was nowhere to be found.

**A new approach for today**

But Attica was more than 40 years ago and, luckily, things have changed. Training, technology, society, culture and exposure have all come together to produce better mindsets and better environments than those which existed when Attica dominated America’s front pages and nightly news broadcasts.

Regardless, history is replete with dark moments such as Attica, some large, some small; some headline-grabbing and some never mentioned at all. But history is filled with bright moments, too — bright moments that represent a new approach to thinking and give hope.

In 2015, BOP Director Charles E. Samuels Jr. spoke to DOJ employees, but in reality, he was speaking to the entire corrections industry. “We must strive every day to acknowledge our differences and our unique talents,” he said, “and to grow closer and stronger because of them.”

In Obama’s diversity and inclusion executive order, it is clearly stated that “the federal government must create a culture that encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness to enable individuals to participate to their full potential.”

This gives proof that administrators, administrations and even presidents may come and go, but the reverberations of what is done and said has an opportunity to take root, effect change and set the “tone and culture” for an entire industry.

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