



## White Men and Diversity

### Examining and Understanding American White Male Culture

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

By Bill Proudman

This is the second of six articles that will discuss how white men can more fully participate in the diversity process. These articles are written by Bill Proudman, founding partner, White Men as Full Diversity Partners LLC (WMFDP). It is our hope that this series of articles will spark a meaningful dialogue about how diversity programs can fully tap the talents and contributions of all employees.

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For corporations and firms committed to a diverse workforce, recognizing and celebrating multiculturalism is a common theme. Both corporate and popular culture strive to recognize the ethnic roots of many international customs. A meaningful examination of culture in the United States can be both complex and difficult. The United States has long been thought of as a melting pot of cultures with people immigrating here from all over the globe. Many cultures have and continue to influence the “American way.”

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 (which is 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 the white male culture, which is the dominant culture in the United States 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 that make up white male culture in America. The next article will

address the impact that 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 the white male culture.

The "norm" goes largely unexamined in most systems. What often gets examined and re-examined 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 ways 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 United States 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 goes unexamined.

Despite its pervasiveness, it's important to examine the roots and characteristics of white male culture, not only for white men but also for those who work with them. This closer examination can help to deepen awareness and understanding, leading to a heightened effectiveness when partnering across differences at work, 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 all people generally are 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 their fierce attachment to individual identity makes hard to swallow. 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 that define white male culture feel free to accept or challenge any of them. Your consideration of the issue will help to frame your understanding and curiosity of the impact of the dominant culture (what we will call white male culture) on organizations and people in the United States. 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 United States, 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 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**

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

- Survivor mentality that focuses on the future;
- Tendency to rugged individualism;
- Can-do attitude;
- Operating from principles and conscience;
- Focusing on hard work, action, and task completion;
- Striving toward success and materialism;
- Measured moderation and silent strength; and
- 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 were 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 utilize 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 these protections for the individual over the institution.

This individualism keeps many white men from discovering the value of ancestral ties that others (especially 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, which 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. According to this creed, the white man acts alone, as necessary, to speak his truth.

### **Focusing 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 that individual's position, the more status the person has.

Corporate culture in the United States 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 ("unequal" white men, 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, however, what is problematic is that often times the success indicators are limited only 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 has 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, which leads 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 often qualities such as collaboration, intuition, and empathy are devalued and/or belittled.

### **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, of everyone else. The result is that 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.