

## CREATIVITY AND DIVERSITY

"And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

JFK address at American University,  
June 10, 1963

This article is about making differences matter by examining diversity issues through a creative, wide-angle lens that brings the whole system of an organization into view. The term diversity itself is in need of renewal, perhaps even renaming, because it unfortunately has become a mis-used, heavily laden and misunderstood term.

To begin, the elements of diversity need to be made clear, and here include: race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, economic class, ability and disability. Roosevelt Thomas, a leading figure in diversity awareness in our country, states that managing diversity is a comprehensive process for developing an environment that works for all employees.<sup>1</sup>

In 1997, organizations now have an opportunity to do diversity work building on the knowledge of what has and hasn't worked in other organizations. And as diversity consultant David Crawford recently said, today the choice is not diversity vs. homogeneity; the choice is between well-managed diversity and badly managed diversity.

In whole systems thinking, the evolution into a "learning organization" that the welcoming of pluralism represents suggests a new approach to diversity. It is not "diversity training", which is often positioned laterally in an organization. It is an approach organizations can weave into the tapestry of their whole enterprise that helps to create an organization, which learns from itself, from its mistakes and successes. This type of enterprise is primed to succeed in today's global and competitive marketplace like no other.

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<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt Thomas, Next Step, 1997

The learning organization or creative approach to pluralism suggests that the two most frequently used approaches will no longer work. These two approaches have been well documented by David Thomas and Robin Ely as the "discrimination and fairness approach" and the "access and legitimacy approach".<sup>2</sup>

The first approach is based on recognition that prejudice has kept members of certain identity groups out of organizations, and/or at the bottom of the career ladder. Its premise is to make sure everyone is treated equally, and often takes the form of mentoring and career development programs, as well as training employees to respect cultural differences.

There are benefits to this approach: it tends to increase diversity, and often succeeds in promoting fair treatment. Its limitations are significant however: there is an implicit assumption that "we are all the same", or we all aspire to being the same."

Using this approach, progress is measured by how the organization achieves its recruitment and retention goals, rather than by the degree to which conditions in the organization allow folks to draw on their identity group perspectives to do their work more effectively. The enterprise might get diversified but the output doesn't.

With this approach, it is not desirable for diversification of the workforce to influence the organization's work or culture. There is also a subtle pressure ensuring that important differences among workers do not count. Genuine disagreements could be wrongly interpreted through this approach's fairness-unfairness viewpoint, rather than disagreements based on cultural differences.

By limiting the ability of employees to openly acknowledge their work-related but culturally based differences, this approach severely limits an enterprises' ability to learn about and improve its practices.

For an enterprise to be successful today, once fairness numbers have been achieved, a culture is needed that encourages open and

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<sup>2</sup> David Thomas, Robin Ely, Making Differences Matter: A new Paradigm for Managing Diversity, Harvard Business Review, 1996

explicit discussion of what identity group differences really mean and how they can be used as sources of individual and organizational effectiveness.

The second approach of "access & legitimacy" is predicated on the acceptance and valuation of differences, based on acknowledgement that ethnic groups are gaining consumer power and a diverse workforce is needed to help gain access to these different market segments.

But the limitations of this approach are that workers with niche abilities are put into pigeonholes without an understanding of what those capabilities really are and how they could be integrated into the organization's mainstream work.

This approach also can leave some people feeling exploited. Many organizations using this approach have diversified only in those areas in which they interact with particular niche-markets. Often the larger organization views the experience of these employees as limited or too specialized.

Additionally, when organizations need to downsize or narrow their focus, it is often the special departments that are the first to go. When colleges felt the economic pinch, remember what happened to Women's' and African-American Studies departments?

## **THE CREATIVE APPROACH**

Although the above approaches were early and respectable attempts that made inroads on utilizing workers' diverse backgrounds, only a systemic, whole systems approach, where differences are recognized and utilized will result in an organization that can learn from its members, renew itself continuously and be truly able to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

This approach is to make the most of an enterprises' pluralism by allowing the organization to learn and grow from the diverse cultural backgrounds of its employees. It behooves enterprises to develop an outlook on diversity that enables them to incorporate diverse perspectives from the entire enterprise into the main work

of the organization, and to enhance the work done by rethinking and perhaps redefining strategies, missions, work practices and even organizational culture.

Why not use the pluralism of diversity to become the enterprise of the 21st century? Think how it will affect the task of attracting workers, managers, customers and suppliers to an organization! Imagine using everyone's brains, hearts and cultural identities to create an enterprise that people are hankering to work within because they know that their thoughts will be listened to, their backgrounds valued, and their input respected. Can you think of a better formula in which creativity and productivity might flourish?

Observations made in organizations that have utilized this wide-angle approach are that *leaders are playing a critical role as facilitators and tone setters*, taking the following kinds of actions.

1. Proactively searching to understand, then learn, from diversity.
2. Legitimizing open discussion.
3. Actively working against forms of dominance that inhibit full contribution, including testing one's own assumptions about the competencies of all members of the organization.
4. Ensuring organizational trust by consistently demonstrating commitment to the process, by setting a tone of honest discourse, acknowledging tensions, and resolving them sensitively.<sup>3</sup>

Without a doubt this approach requires a strong commitment to giving higher-risk, higher-anxiety, improvement-generating change greater priority than the security of what is familiar. Not an easy challenge, but one necessary to meet the demands of the 21st century world that is at our doorsteps.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.