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Building Working Relationships/Improving Outcomes

Thinking About Diversity of Thought

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Diversity of thought—the idea of more-than-one-way— is key to understanding the potential of diversity and inclusion as an organizational resource. The way each of us interprets and negotiates the world around us is informed by our identity, culture and experience. Greater diversity means greater variation in perspectives and approaches. Yet the potential of this resource is often mismanaged and overlooked. To further the conversation, this paper suggests three factors organizational leadership might consider in order to access and leverage diversity of thought: 1) willingness, 2) readiness and 3) opportunity.

On February 16, 2008, NPR's Weekend Edition featured a story "Maps Help Blind See," which reported on Dr. Joshua Miele's invention—street maps for the blind and visually impaired. Produced through an innovative TMAP technology from Smith-Kettlewell Eye Institute, tactile Braille maps indicate paths of travel, intersections and the location of facilities like train stations. What? How can a person with limited or no sight use a map? Here is a perfect example of where an assumption, that spatial understanding is formed visually, is confronted with the reality of "more-than-one-way". People with impaired vision build mental maps in their heads from other clues, street sounds for example. Yet until this innovation, learning the way around a new neighborhood was reduced to trial and error. Braille maps provide a valuable resource for the spatial organization of information, introducing a new way to communicate spatial relationships, a clear illustration of more-than-one-way to think about mapping.

It's time to think more about diversity of thought, the significance of differences in perspective and approach rooted in diverse identity and experience, the concept of more-than-one-way. Diversity of thought is fundamental to understanding the power of diversity and inclusion. It never fails to catch me by surprise. It's what creates learning, stimulates the possibility of innovation and actively demonstrates respect. Multiple perspectives and experiences expand a group's range of understanding and methods. At the organizational systems level, diversity of thought is fundamental to the "value in diversity" proposition. It is a key component of what makes diversity and inclusion pragmatic.

The stage is set. Few in the diversity field will disagree that the old concept of the "melting pot" society with its imposed expectation of cultural assimilation is now outdated. Organizations devote money and effort to become more inclusive, where everyone is

MORE THAN ONE WAY

recognized and valued and where purpose is achieved though leveraging diversity. Today's language of diversity encourages us to recognize differences as well as similarities. We are expected to function successfully in a world where each of us should have the right to self-identify, where treating everyone the same is not necessarily equitable, and where there is always more-than-one-way.

For the workplace, the reality is that greater workforce diversity introduces greater complexity. The potential for misunderstanding and conflict is heightened, necessitating attention to interpersonal skills, relationship building and culture change. Along with this, however, greater diversity brings increased potential for innovative solution finding and enhanced performance. While many organizational leaders acknowledge workforce diversity as an asset to be leveraged, I harbor a suspicion that the concept is more frequently understood in terms of traditional talent management than diversity of thought.

Diversity practitioners, proponents and scholars have been considering the link between diversity, solution-finding and creativity enhanced performance for some time. Frans Johansson in [The Medici Effect](#) offers numerous illustrations of the explosion of knowledge and creativity in contexts where ideas cross disciplines and cultures. The substantive body of academic research on the performance of diverse teams documents that homogeneous teams get to work more easily and more quickly, but when diverse teams learn to work together, the outcomes are superior. The integration and effectiveness paradigm for diversity advocated by Harvard Business School faculty, Robin Ely and David Thomas, stresses that an organization's capacity to leverage diversity rests with its ability to learn from diverse perspectives. From the field of cybernetics, the Law of Requisite Variety tells us that the greater the variety

the greater the ability to respond to changing environments.

I've just come across the work of Scott E. Page, professor of complex systems, political science and economics at the University of Michigan. He puts it this way, "Diversity trumps ability." He's applied mathematical modeling and case studies to prove that teams of strong, but diverse individuals outperform teams of the best individuals with similar perspectives and ways of approaching a problem. Solution-finding lies in the greater possibility created through the collective combination of diverse ideas and approaches.

Open-mindedness to the recognition of more-than-one-way is both powerful and empowering. When talking about diversity, I often suggest that this idea be added explicitly to expand the frequently cited working definition of diversity. I like to think of diversity as "differences and similarities and the varied perspectives and approaches that diverse experience informs." The question then becomes how can an organization leverage the potential of diversity of thought. What needs to be in place for an organization to best access and utilize this powerful resource?

I had the opportunity to think this through with a group of diversity practitioners and professionals recently at a national diversity conference. The conversation that ensued produced several observations which clustered around three factors— 1) **willingness**, 2) **readiness** and 3) **opportunity**. The first of these, willingness, rests with the person; the latter two, are descriptive of the organization. All have implications for diversity and inclusion strategy. I offer them here to promote further dialogue.

Begin with the question of access to diverse thinking. It's important to recognize that a person who thinks

differently from others controls the decision to reveal that thinking or to keep it silent. Consider a Johari window, a diagram which illustrates the various states of “knowing.” There are four sections in the window— I know what I know, I know what I don’t know, I don’t know what I think I know, and finally, I don’t know what I don’t know. I suspect that too often our knowledge of diversity of thought falls in this last section, unrecognized and unknown.

The question of access to diversity of thought must recognize there is a decision that happens when a person offers a perspective or approach informed by his or her diverse identity and experience. Access requires **willingness** to share alternative points of view. What goes into that person’s decision to offer his or her perspective? What motivates a person to share a different thought or approach? What creates willingness? Imagine likely responses: respect, recognition, trust, fairness, safety, reward, etc. Each of us negotiates our involvement with our environment, deciding how much insight to offer, especially if that insight is informed by one’s difference. To access diversity of thought, one question organizational leadership should be asking is: What can be done to influence the “willingness negotiation,” to motive engagement?

The next condition to consider is **readiness**, the factors that enable listening to and learning from diversity of thought. What behaviors are encouraged, supported, rewarded and valued? Is there care taken to develop the interpersonal skills that facilitate learning—communication, dialogue, conflict resolution, information sharing, inquiry, issue analysis, problem-solving, consensus building, accountability, etc. Along with these add the host of diversity skills: self-awareness, awareness of others, flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, etc. How is the process of analysis

and solution finding conceptualized in the organization? Organizations that are ready to leverage diversity support an environment that encourages people to learn from one another’s diversity.

Diversity of thought introduces not only differences of perspective, but also differences in approach. Traditional, rule bound organizations that impose one right way, restrict learning from alternative ways of doing things. Organizations that prove successful in learning from diversity of thought may well find criteria-guided decision-making, focused on outcome, more productive than rule-bound decision-making, focused on enforcement of one approach. In a fast paced, changing environment, to those who say, “But we’ve always done it that way,” I’ll ask, “So how do you learn when you get stuck?”

One side of learning from diversity of thought is readiness; the other is **opportunity**— who talks to who about what? The way an organization is structured and organizes the work process makes a difference. Reduced hierarchy, group process, focus groups, cross-functional teaming, practices for information sharing, suggestions, idea generation, problem-solving and feedback, etc. are vehicles that open opportunity for learning from diversity of thought. Are avenues present to allow people, from various levels and functions, to offer their ideas, suggestions and insights? Is information communicated up, down and across the organization? Are there processes in place that allow for interaction, participation and influence? Does the structure and practice of decision-making enable organizational learning? Employee resource groups or affinity groups are one diversity strategy designed, in part, to capture this opportunity for learning. I am also reminded of the focus on empowerment and participation that was more characteristic of organizational

WILLINGNESS
READINESS
OPPORTUNITY

RECOGNITION
RESPECT
TRUST
INCLUSION

structure and work organization in the mid 1980's and 1990's. Firms and organizations that were then labeled high performance organizations were structured to capture organizational learning in response to a more global, fast paced, rigorously competitive, quality focused operating environment. The performance improvements from strategies were well documented at the time. What was largely overlooked is the focus on diversity of thought influenced by people's identities, cultures and experiences.

Today a common distinction is made that diversity is about who people are, demographics, identities and experiences, while organizational inclusion is about leveraging diversity to achieve superior performance. My colleague, Robert Rich of ICG Consulting, puts it this way, "Is diversity in place but not in play?" The diversity movement has brought recognition to the proposition that having diversity represented across organizational levels brings advantage. Thinking about diversity of thought takes this one step further. Diversity is a resource to be accessed and utilized for superior performance, in part, because of more-

than-one-way thinking. Significantly, if the logic of this piece holds true, access to diversity of thought is blocked unless organizations also create an environment of fairness, non-discrimination, respect and trust. Failure to do so compromises the willingness negotiation. In other words, the social justice side of the diversity conversation links to the performance side. Without it, diversity of thought is a resource withheld.

It's often said that diversity and inclusion are part of the "fabric of the organization." I interpret this to mean that diversity and inclusion are systemic, connecting human resource policy and practice to culture to work process and organizational structure. For visionary organizational leaders, the question moves beyond merely including diversity and inclusion on the list of strategic goals to one of realizing the linkage between diversity and inclusion and the achievement of the other strategic goals on that list. In a globalized and increasingly diverse world, the connection, I suspect, lies in accessing and utilizing diversity of thought. The first step is to recognize the resource. The second is to respect it.

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