

## A MATTER OF DIFFERENCE

### Inclusion and Power: Reflections on Dominance and Subordination in Organizations



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All differences are not created equally. Earnest and well-meaning efforts to create inclusion in organizations often come up short for reasons that appear hard to understand. The leaders of the organization implement policies, procedures, and practices similar to those we outlined in our last column (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002) as a way of fostering inclusion in organizations. Yet they feel stymied by the intractability of continuing problems in the work community such as racial or gender inequities, perceptions of unfair exclusion by a variety of organization members, and pervasive feelings of alienation.

At this year's SIOP Conference in Toronto, we convened a special session, *Dialogue on Diversity and Inclusion in Organizations: SIOP and Beyond*, in which a diverse group of SIOP members engaged one another in an exciting and provocative conversation that revealed just this paradox.

Three invited panelists—**Ann Marie Ryan**, **Robert Dipboye**, and **Michele Gelfand**—joined the two of us in initiating the conversation. Two or three dozen other people then joined us in the 2-hour dialogue that used a unique fishbowl design to allow the feel of conversation in a small group while including a large number of participants. Our objective together was to envision what full inclusion might look and feel like at SIOP and to understand how our vision could generalize to (and from) other organizations. Moreover, we sought to understand how we might ensure that each of us, with our differences, could feel and actually be highly valued and fully included in the organization. A variety of topics and perspectives arose in the session, during which we addressed the progress that has been made on making SIOP more diverse, the extent to which people struggle to feel a sense of being welcomed as a newcomer in our community, and the proactive steps that have been and are being taken to make SIOP an even more inclusive organization.

But another important part of the dialogue centered on the ways that some members more than others have a tougher time fitting in at SIOP. For example, those Conference attendees who are not White, heterosexual, published scholars, full SIOP members, and/or U.S.-based were more likely to report feeling less included. Some even spoke of feeling *invisible* at the Confer-

ence. In our next column, we hope to bring in more specific examples as they relate to SIOP. For now, suffice it to say that this difference in experience has something to do with individuals' primary social identities and how those identities fit into a "power map" featuring dominance and subordination.

### **The Power Map: Dominance and Subordination**

A prerequisite for exploring the idea of power here is to situate our discussion at the group level of analysis. Every person is certainly a unique individual, but we all also share group memberships with others as part of our identity (Ferdman, 1995); these group memberships affect the way we treat and are treated by others. A discussion of power in this context does not address individual talent, merit, achievement, or influence as much as it addresses the societal and organizational position of different groups to which one might belong. All groups do not hold equal status in most societies—some tend to be systematically privileged while others are systematically disadvantaged. Dimensions along which privilege and disadvantage manifest include ease of institutional access (such as job hiring, homeownership, etc.), level of inclusion in mainstream culture, and access to influence in political systems. We use the label *subordinant*<sup>1</sup> for those groups in lower power positions (e.g., people of color relative to non-Hispanic Whites, or women relative to men) and the label *dominant* for those groups in higher power positions (e.g., heterosexuals relative to gays and lesbians, Christians relative to Muslims or Jews in the United States).

So, when a woman occupies an executive-level position in a predominantly male organization, she may wield substantial power as an individual; however, she would still be a member of a subordinant group. As a female in the organization, she is likely to (a) be in the numerical minority, (b) need to adopt behaviors that allow her to fit in socially with male colleagues (e.g., become knowledgeable about topics men tend to care about), and (c) manage the resentments that may arise by virtue of being a powerful woman in a society in which men tend to hold the most powerful positions and in which it is considered counter-normative for women to behave as leaders (cf. Eagly, in press; Eagly & Karau, in press). Her position in the organizational chart does not shield her completely from needing to negotiate these "group-based" dynamics. Similarly, when a man is an hourly wage earner working at the lowest levels of the same organization, he may have very little organizational power as an *individual*. But as a member of his identity-group (male), he benefits in both overt and subtle ways in the organization.

Two critical results of this kind of power distinction are *privilege*, and group-based prejudice and *discrimination*. Peggy McIntosh (1988) has writ-

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term *subordinant* rather than *subordinate* to distinguish between power group membership/status and simple job level in the organization.

ten eloquently on privilege—the systematic access to resources, benefits, and psychological well-being that results from being identified as a member of a dominant group. Most notably, privilege in this sense is not earned in any tangible way—it is just there for dominants. In contrast, group-based bias or discrimination is the systematic *denial of access* to resources, benefits, and psychological well-being that results from being identified as a member of a subordinate group. Similarly, this discrimination is not *deserved* in any way—it is just persists for subordinates (Davidson & Friedman, 1998). Other terms for this discrimination (depending upon the dimension of difference under consideration) are “-isms”—racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so forth.

The primary implication of this distinction is that even the best of intentions to create an inclusive environment may be stilted if the dynamics of these group power relationships are ignored. A recent study of managers of color in U.S. corporations illustrates this point (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2002). Although there were strong direct effects of (a) advancement opportunity, (b) effectiveness of feedback processes, (c) level of pay increases, and (d) firm commitment to diversity on individual organizational commitment, the strong indirect effects of perceived racism dampened those direct effects. Even if an organization attends to the four domains, ignoring the impact of these managers' perceptions of racism made it all the more difficult to design systems and cultures of inclusiveness that would entice them to stay.

### **How Dominants Can Be Inclusive**

Through the lens of dominance and subordination, we can enhance our understanding of what it takes to create and participate in an inclusive organization and community (Wishik & Davidson, 2002). As a dominant, prerequisites for supporting inclusion are as follows:

- *Assuming a stance of “inquisitive probability.”* This means acknowledging that one is a member of a dominant group and that this group membership has implications for how one engages those who are in subordinate groups (as well as other dominants). This stance contrasts with an attitude of denial in which dominants reflexively assert a null hypothesis when phenomena related to group differences emerge. For example, when an African-American man asserts that he is not receiving timely performance feedback because he is Black, his White colleague would acknowledge the possible veracity of the statement, *even though*, the White colleague believes the organization is one in which no one gets timely performance feedback. The skill is in the White colleague's ability to allow for the possibility that no one gets much feedback, *and* the African American colleague may get even less than his other White colleagues. In these kinds of situations group differences may, in fact, be irrelevant. The skill for the dominant is to be open to the possibility that they are relevant.

- *Distinguishing impact from intent.* This is the skill of acknowledging that a dominant's behavior toward a subordinate may be completely benevolent in intention but may be perceived by the subordinate as injurious. For example, when a man touches a female colleague's shoulder, he may intend no disrespect—the act could be purely an attempt to comfort a colleague in the midst of a stressful work session. However, he must be able to understand that his actions could be perceived by the woman (or other colleagues) as inappropriate and possibly harassing. With this awareness, he can proactively engage his colleague to reduce perceptions of inappropriateness, manage the perceptions of other colleagues, and make more judicious and appropriate decisions about similar behavior in the future.
- *Increasing accuracy about the meaning of difference to subordinate colleagues.* When dominants make an effort to educate themselves about the experience of subordinates, they increase the overall sense of inclusion in the organization. When the U.S.-based members of SIOP who attended the dialogue session learned that international members sometimes felt excluded in the organization, that knowledge positioned those U.S. members to engage international members with a deeper understanding of the non-U.S. experience at SIOP. The knowledge alone does not guarantee that the dominant colleague will actually engage the subordinate colleague, but if she or he chooses to do so, the conversation could happen in a way that enhances inclusion.
- *Acting to reduce structural barriers to inclusion.* Dominants must use their positions of influence and privilege as dominants to change the structure and systems that exclude subordinates. This can happen in both dramatic and subtle ways. Some dominants are extremely active and vocal about change. But not everyone can assume such a stance. Other dominants can make this change through tempered radicalism, a more gradual path to change (Meyerson, 2001).

### **How Subordinates Can Be Inclusive**

But dominants are not the only members of the community responsible for fostering inclusion. Subordinates' roles in the inclusion calculus are somewhat different from those of dominants because subordinates often are not included and are seeking to be so. Nevertheless, they have a role to play which manifests in skills such as the following:

- *Assuming a stance of cautious openness.* In most circumstances, dominants will not have a sophisticated sense of what is supportive for subordinates. Therefore, many engagements will be fraught with the possibility of injury—political, interpersonal, psychological, and sometimes even physical. But even in the face of that reality, subordinates cannot afford to distance themselves completely from dominant col-

leagues. Cautious openness is the skill of remaining engaged in dialogue and mutual learning while remaining aware of the damage that can sometimes result from dominants' behavior.

- *Giving effective feedback.* Often, a remnant of the systematic mistreatment of people in subordinated groups is that indirect language and communication patterns are cultivated with dominants as a means of circumventing dominants' injurious behavior. But in an inclusive environment, such indirect communication is a liability, especially when feedback is involved. If dominants are expected to make mistakes as they learn to engage subordinates constructively, they must have data on what behaviors should be reinforced and what behaviors should be eliminated. Only subordinates (or skilled allies of subordinates) can provide that data.
- *Inviting dominants to be guests in subordinates' culture.* Sometimes, subordinates can shift the locus of comfort and power by opening up their group space to dominants committed to learning. For example, it is often said the most segregated time in the U.S. is 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning—church time. This would be an ideal opportunity for subordinates (at least those who are Christian) to utilize this skill—invite a dominant to church! Most importantly, this skill fosters community (and hence inclusion) by contextualizing dominants' experience in a way similar to the way subordinates' experience is contextualized in dominant environments.
- *Pushing for constructive change.* Subordinates often have the most acute view of the problems and barriers to inclusion. Scholars have identified the phenomenon of marginality and have outlined the kinds of information and insight that result from being marginalized (Johnston, 1976; Weisberger, 1992). Despite the fact that subordinates often experience the responsibility to change as an unwanted burden, they are nonetheless uniquely positioned to initiate such change.

### Concluding Thoughts

Upon reflection of this column, we are struck by the fact that each of us is possessed of multiple identities and, at anytime, a particular aspect of our identity may place us in a subordinate or a dominant position. For example, as heterosexual men of color, we are subordinates in a predominantly White, Anglo context but dominants in that same predominantly heterosexual and male context. To effectively create an inclusive community, each of us must come to terms with our role as dominants and subordinates in our organizations.

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Correction: In the April 2002 edition of *TIP*, Vol. 39, No. 4, the order of authorship for this column should have been listed as Bernardo M. Ferdman and Martin N. Davidson.