



Diversity and Inclusion: What Difference Does it Make?

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To choose not to engage in dialogue about diversity in almost any modern organization is just plain dumb. On the surface, that may seem like a controversial, even offensive, statement. After all, thoughtful individuals have grappled with the implications of valuing diversity in a variety of organizations. For every proponent who argues that diversity is the right and rational thing to do in a corporation, school, or professional organization, there is an equally articulate opponent arguing that “valuing diversity” is too often a proxy for instituting unjust policies (e.g., quotas) that deny qualified people opportunities, and harm the underqualified people afforded opportunities with which they are unprepared to cope (Ferdman, 1997).

This kind of powerful discourse (sometimes conducted in less than civil tones) pervades modern organizations in the United States, and increasingly, in other parts of the world. In Europe, the advent of the European Union, in which numerous countries will operate with unprecedented interdependence, promises to present diversity challenges at least as complex as those we have struggled with in the U.S. In South Africa, the downfall of apartheid and what some see as the inevitable dominance of capitalism makes the negotiation of race of paramount importance. In Latin America, changing economic conditions and gender roles, together with increasing consciousness of native peoples, have made long-standing societal fault lines even more explicit.

Do you notice anything interesting about the exchange described in the first paragraph? Hopefully it has some face validity, but beyond that, it frames the discourse around diversity as a debate, with proponents and opponents. This is not an unusual phenomenon, but that doesn’t make it constructive. Even though many people talk about diversity as a social advancement, as a movement or principle associated with greater equality and fairness, far too often diversity becomes associated with scarce resources and competition over what is valued (Davidson, 1999). Some person or some group is trying to gain something while some other person in some other group is trying to protect something. This is the nexus at which so many attempts to generate and nurture diversity have failed. Yet, in the

midst of this and other challenges, the imperative of dealing with our differences in new and creative ways remains.

The question is “How do we do it?” Let’s look at an interesting case as a prelude to answering that question. At a *Fortune* 10 corporation, a top leadership team that increased its racial and gender diversity with the promotion of a relatively young African-American team leader was in turmoil. The senior members of the team, all White men, were particularly disturbed by the leader’s appointment of four new African-American team members to the 15-person team. The two women he appointed, one African American and one White, were also of concern—they seemed far too young. The younger White men on the team who were really threatened by all of this expected to rise to positions of authority through what they perceived as a fair process of advancement. These personnel moves completely upset that expectation, and they were unsure where they would land in the midst of it all.

The African Americans on the team were terrified. They felt as if they had entered the jaws of the whale and though they felt very willing and ready to take on the responsibilities of their positions, the conflict with the White men in the team was aggravating and draining. Moreover, some of these men, whom they had respected and looked up to as professional mentors, were now cool towards them. Finally, they were acutely aware that the team leader was being tested. Headquarters was watching to see if this Black man could run a major division effectively. The African-American members felt a fierce loyalty to one of their own, and any dissent was taken “collectively.”

Over the course of 18 months, this team moved from turmoil to a fairly high level of functioning. Relationships were built across the racial and gender lines and although every person didn’t like every other person on the team, they began to act and talk about the team as unit, as a collective that had to act as one, and that had to defer to its leader, given the culture of the corporation. In their personal lives, few team members crossed racial or gender lines, perhaps a result of their location in the southeast U.S. Nevertheless, this team was working, and this division was the most profitable business unit in the corporation, making record revenues each of 4 consecutive years.

How did they do it? We believe it has to do with directly engaging with difference as a key to creating inclusion.

The subtleties of this and other such turnarounds will be the topic of this ongoing column, **A Matter of Difference**. In the coming 2 years, we will take up various facets of diversity and inclusion as they apply to organizations as a whole and to our organization, SIOP, in particular. We hope to inform you, stimulate you, and sometimes provoke you to think critically about diversity, how it affects us, and what we can do about and with it.

We think the core of the answer to our question, “How do we do it?” rests in a different, inclusive vision of diversity. Consider that the opening paragraph of this column framed the issue of diversity as a debate. This was intentional misdirection. It’s not that the points raised are not valid and

debatable. They are simply not the main point. We believe in moving beyond “either/or” logic and finding ways to link even seemingly contradictory positions (Ferdman, 1992). Our vision of diversity is not about quotas, nor about counting the numbers of one type of person or another. Rather, it’s about building a broad-scope, inclusive, and just organization in which trust and respect are the default options for all the members of the community. This is an organization that continuously learns how to better use all human capacity for both individual and collective good. To value diversity, to value difference in a community means that policies, structures, and norms of behavior must be aligned in such a way that every member of the community is respected and included. Honest dialogue among members of almost any community reveals that there are usually segments of the community that feel disrespected, misrepresented, or left out of the loop. True inclusion attempts to bring those people into the mainstream of the community organization. And that is often a formidable task.

But truly inclusive organizations don’t just stop there. They also emphasize the importance of helping those who are in the mainstream continue to feel like they are part of the mainstream. Inclusive visions of diversity don’t just focus on redefining who the “winner” is of the resource at hand. Rather, they focus on enlarging the resources so that all can benefit from them. This is the direction of the most sophisticated thinking on diversity today. It’s about the container into which we all fit.

Now, the sharper and more cynical of our readers might give this the sniff test and say we don’t pass. Isn’t this “vision” merely a platitude that sidesteps the toughest issues about diversity—how do we, as an organization, increase representation of people of color and White women? How do we create an intellectual climate in which good research on diversity is actually respected? How do we train ourselves to engage the larger world on the issues that matter most to us?

We say: in time. We may not have answers to these and other questions, but through careful inquiry, we plan to tackle these and other issues head on. Our ability to understand, value, and benefit from difference in the world and in our organization matters profoundly. Let’s use our best understanding of our theory, research and practice to give this issue its due attention.

References

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