Chapter 5

Managing Diversity

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You have just been given the task by your boss, or your competitors, or your customers, of managing diversity. You need to supply lots of answers. Here are six questions (and some answers) to guide you toward your own answers.

What?

Diversity is often used today to refer to the biological diversity that is fast disappearing from our physical environment. Paradoxically, human diversity seems to be growing in our business environment. Or at least our awareness is growing. The diversity has always been there.

Unless everyone in your *organization* is white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and 35 years old, then you have diversity in your *organization*.

Unless every one of your *customers* is white, male, middle-class, heterosexual able-bodied, and 35 years old, then you have diversity in your *customers*.

And, unless every one of your shareholders, suppliers, and other stakeholders is white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and 35 years old then you have diversity in the people your organization must deal with daily.

Why?

Here are two quick answers to the question 'Why is it necessary to manage diversity?'

1. If you do not manage diversity, then diversity will manage you. Diversity will manage you if you do not at least begin to manage it first. It may seem ridiculous to you to spend your tin1e dealing with government inspectors or a full-blown court case because someone believes that she or he was ignored for promotion or insulted by a superior. Even if it seems ridiculous to you, you will be spending time and money you could spend elsewhere. And you will be losing staff morale at a tremendous rate. Which leads to the second answer:
2. If you do not manage diversity, son1eone else will. When your people discover that another organization values them more than you do, they will go to that other organization. If that makes your organ1zat1on less diverse, then you face precisely the same danger that an ecology faces when it gradually loses biodiversity. You are less likely to survive.

You can, of course, manage diversity because you believe that it is the morally correct thing to do. I believe that it is. But even if you think that is ridiculous, you can still manage diversity because to do so is profitable.

Research shows that although diverse teams at first perform worse than homogeneous teams, over time they develop and eventually exceed the performance of homogeneous teams. Unless you are only interested in the short term (in which case you should not be managing at all), then you know that in the long term you and your organization will profit from managing diversity effectively.

When?

The question 'When do you manage diversity?' again generates two answers:

3. As soon as possible (or the competition will do it for you)
4. All the time.

Diversity is not just an issue to bring up occasionally as a way of being nice to people whom you might perceive as not having the 'good fortune' to be like you. Managing diversity means building on the range of experiences, skills, values and beliefs that exist in a diverse group, blending them in a way that makes your organization unique and profitable.

Who?

Who is responsible in your organization for managing diversity? If you are the boss, you are. If your boss has given you the task, give it back! Responsibility for diversity cannot be delegated. Of course, some of the work can be delegated to someone other than the boss.

As the boss, if you do decide to choose someone to do some of the work, consider the choice between two possible people in your organization. One of these stands out as someone who is typical of the top management in gender, race, class and so forth. The other person does not match these
criteria and is, therefore, not 'typical'. You have three options.

Option 1 – Your first option is to assign both people, the 'typical' one and the 'not typical' one. They will learn from each other and model diversity every time they appear somewhere in the organization. This is the best of the three options.

Option 2 – The next best option is to put the one who is 'typical' in charge of diversity and the one who is 'not typical' in a visible, line position. That way you send a powerful message to both of those people and to everyone else in your organization.

Option 3 – The worst option is to put the 'not typical' person in charge of diversity. She or he already knows about the issue, so will learn nothing except how to become more frustrated by the organization. Everyone else in the organization will see once again that diversity is an issue only for 'not typical' people, and assume that 'the rest of us can forget about it.'

Where?

Where do you manage diversity? By now, the answer should be obvious. The answer is everywhere. You need diversity at the sharp end, to match your customers. You need diversity in the creative and production areas, to boost your effectiveness and competitiveness.

You especially need diversity in top management. A colleague of mine was attempting to make this point to the board of a manufacturing company. After presenting research showing that most of the customers who purchased their refrigerators and cookers were women, my colleague pointed out the absence of women on the board. The dialogue went something like this:

Colleague: If you want to stay ahead of your competition, you have two options. First, bring some women on to the board.
The board: No, No! What is our other option?
Colleague: Some of you need to begin thinking like women.
The board: Ah. What was the first option again?

How?

How do you manage diversity? The first answer to that question has to do with our own experiences and perceptions, not with other people. How old were you when you noticed that other people had an accent? How much older were you when you first realized that you had an accent yourself?

Before you start working with the diversity of other people, you need to consider and recognize your own diversity. Like everyone else in your organization, you represent one of many cultures (gender, race, class and so on). Fill in the list shown in Figure 5.1 to get a sense of your own culture.

As you look at this list, you will see that you have given your self certain descriptions. For instance under race, I could call myself white or Caucasian. Someone else might enter black or African. In America, many people hyphenate themselves as African-American or Asian-American.

The important point about diverstiy is to look at what you wrote for yourself. Those are the only terms you can be sure of. Someone else might prefer differentet terms. I might think you are native American but you might want to be called an American Indian, that is your choice. You may think I am handicapped, but if I want to be called disabled, that is my choice.This is not so much being politically correctas being personally correct. Since my ownname is Walt, I prefer to be called Walt and I prefer to choose my other names too.

If you identified yourself on the chart as white, male, and heterosexual – the likely description of a 'typical' manager in the modern western world – then you should certainly read the following section of this chapter with particular attention.

What has diversity got to do with me?

This section is autobiographical and lists seven of the lessons about diversity that I have learned so far from my own experiences. It is adapted from the eighth edition of the *Reading Book for Human Relations Training*, edited by Al Cooke, Argentine Craig, Michael Broom and Barbara Greig, published by the NTL Institute. 1997. and reprinted here with permission.

1. It's me

Diversity begins with me. I need to understand myself before I can understand you. When I was eight, a Tennessee cousin visited our family farm in Ohio. I could not understand him because he had an accent. Ten years later, while I was workingo on a ranch in New Mexico, and getting teased about the way talked, I finally understood that I had an accent too.

When I am about to meet new people, I catch myself thinking what are they like?' instead of first asking what am I like?' I now use my checklist of 20 items (Figure 5.1) to remind me of my own identity and of the impact that my identity is likely to have on others If I meet another heterosexual white male person I have one kind of impact. But if I meet a woman or a Malaysian or a bisexual person, then I have a different impact. It starts before It starts before I open my mouth. The iimpact comes from the groups (heterosexual, white, and male) that I represent.

My own culture	
	I am:
Gender	
Race	
Age	
Ethnicity	
Sexual orientation	
Social class	
Ability or disability	
Religion	
Nationality	
Place of origin	
Place of residence	
Region of residence	
First language	
Accent	
Education	
Profession	
Organization	
Position	
Wealth	
Ideology	

Figure 5.1 Culture self-questionnaire

I used to argue that it was not my fault that some other people like me did bad things in the past. That might be so, but it does not change my impact on the other person. If I use that argument I just show that I fail to understand the fear, frustration, and anger that my presence can evoke. That is true not only because of the bad things done by people of my own culture in the past. It is because within my culture are individuals, groups, institutions and societies that are continuing to do bad things right now. If I cannot understand that, then it is up to me to work on myself until I do. I cannot expect other people to do my diversity work for me.

2. It's you

You are different from me. You are a different gender or colour or orientation or class or age, or you are different in one of a dozen other ways.

This makes things complicated. Sometimes I feel like Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*: 'Why can't a woman be more like a man?' or, even better, 'Why can't everyone be like me?' I keep learning that I cannot expect a woman to be like a man or to be like me or to be like anyone but herself. I have gone through several phases in this learning.

I have since noticed that these seven learning phases also apply to racism and the other -isms, but I first discovered them as I learned about sexism. Like most men, I began at what I call Phase Zero. I did not even know sexism existed. When I did discover sexism, I asked women if they thought I was sexist. They politely said 'No', and I relaxed into Phase One.

As women realized this, they spoke up less politely and said, 'Yes, you are sexist.' So I moved into Phase Two: 'Oh. I was sexist? I'm sorry, I won't do that again', as if I were cured for life!

Gradually, the women in my life convinced me that sexism is a continuing thing for men. I can be sexist intentionally or unintentionally. I can be sexist as an individual or as a member of an institution. Whatever my personal intent, the impact on the woman is the same. As I learned this, I moved into Phase Three, an active, lifelong alertness to my own sexism.

I remember saying, when I was in Phase Three, that there might be another phase to come. Phase Four was so subtle I could not see it - particularly because I now described myself as a feminist. I was actively helping women deal with sexism from men. I was on their side, helping them all the time. Drowning them in help.

Eventually, a few women told me that they did not need my help nearly as much as I needed to give it. If I really wanted to change things, they suggested I talk to men. In Phase Five, I put my energy into helping men deal with sexism.

I am still a feminist, but my focus in Phase Six is on being a masculinist. I am learning with other men to become more masculine in a way that gives us dignity and pride as men while respecting our differences from women and our equality with women.

These phases may sound like a neat linear progression, and that is true for Phases Zero, One and Two. But I have learned that I need to pay attention to Phases Three, Four, Five and Six simultaneously. It is my duty as a human bemg to remain alert to my own -isms, to support those who are put down, to confront those who are on top, and to develop my own sense of myself.

You are the one who knows who you are. In the US there are politically correct terms for people. I recently learned that my politically correct term for someone may not be her personally correct term for herself. I referred to a woman in my group as a Native American. She reacted by saying that anyone of us in the room who was born in America could be a Native American. She said, 'I am an American Indian.'

Since you may change what you want to be called, I have to keep listening and honour your decision to change. When Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali, he gave his first interviews to Howard Cosell because, while other sports writers kept using the old name, Cosell immediately called him Muhammad Ali.

As Jacques Brel says in one of his songs: 'If we only have love, we can use our own names.'

3. It's us

Diversity includes all of us. There is a paradox about inclusion. Almost every time I speak inclusively, I exclude someone. I took a Jewish friend to the beautiful cathedral near where I lived. During the service, the minister inclusively welcomed 'Christians from all over the world' and thus excluded my friend.

Although I was born in the US, I have lived in England since 1982. Like many Americans I grew up pretending that everyone is middle class. Until I met my friend Ron Hill in college, no one had ever confronted me on the class issue. Now that I live in England, I am quite aware of social class. Sometimes I think the British focus on class as a way of avoiding the race issue, while the Americans focus on race as a way of avoiding the class issue.

I still work regularly in the United States, where I hear 'inclusive' statements about 'everyone in the country' that exclude me. I get frustrated by discussions of diversity that ignore the world outside the US. Diversity means all of us – everywhere.

When I became disabled seven years ago, I was frustrated and angry. I began meeting regularly with two support groups. In these groups we are all disabled so we all understand each other without having to 'explain' everything. That is one way of defining a culture: when you and I are from the same culture, we do not need to explain things. When you and I are from different cultures, we need to explain many things.

Now I understand why other people form support groups. As a typical white male, I saw no need for all the women to sit together or for all the blacks to eat together. Of course, I am usually surrounded by people just like me, so I do not need to think about forming a group.

One of the great benefits of dealing with other cultures is that we eventually discover our own culture, just as I eventually discovered that I have an accent.
People of my own culture are learning to talk with each other - and to be proud of who we are. That is important. When I am proud of who I am, I can more easily accept other people who are proud of who they are.

One way we can work together is to be allies for each other. As a disabled person, I have allies. These are people who offer me the help I need and, if they don't know what I need, they ask. Allies do not take over. They open the door for me - but they don't carry me through it.

As an ally, I speak up for an Arab friend who is not in the meeting. As an ally, I object to sexist jokes in a group of men. That takes a lot more nerve than doing it in a mixed group - which is why I don't always manage to get my mouth open.

I first learned about allies from watching my father. He was a lawyer and
spent a lot of time in rooms where there were only people like him. But he spoke up for the people outside the room. And he got those people into the room.

I have learned not to expect thanks for being an ally. In fact I might become a lightning rod for the anger and frustration of the people I am supporting. I have learned that this means you trust me enough to risk being angry. And if I listen to you, then you will listen to me. We are in this together. It's us.

4. It's up

In North America and in Europe, heterosexual white males are the dominant group. In the rest of the world, heterosexual men of other colours are the dominant groups.

The only thing stranger than this is the fact that most of us do not think of ourselves as being part of the dominant group. Dominant (up) people are usually unaware of being up but, conversely, subordinate (down) people are very aware of being down.

I feel myself to be an individual, but that is the privilege I have as a member of the dominant group. People in subordinate groups do not have that privilege. So a white person says to a black person, 'Why do you people blame all whites? I personally am not prejudiced.' And there it is: the white person expects to be treated as an individual yet simultaneously talks to the black person as a member of a group (you people).

5. It's down

I learned a lot from my disabling injury seven years ago. People either stared or looked away. People asked my companion what I wanted to eat, assuming that physical disability equals mental disability. Suddenly I was down instead of up. So what do I do when I am down? As Lennox Joseph says, my work asa subordinate is to move ahead on my own journey and pull the dominant ones along."

Pushing on the ups wears me down; I need to focus on what I can do for myself. This does not mean giving up or giving in. Down people will only get social justice if they continue to fight for it. The key is to fight *for* social justice and not fight *against* the people who are dominant.

Some 15 years ago, I joined a team of ten consultants to run a series of workshops. I was the only white Anglo male on the team. After the first day's session, everyone gatlhered for a drink - except me. Martha Romero, the boss, came to find me. I explained that I was working on tomorrow's session. 'No you're not,' she said. 'You're hiding out because you're in the minority. I'm Chicano and I know all about that!' She was right. I had just had a tiny taste of what it's like to be down.

So, do I now really understand? Do I understand:

- The fear of a young black man who is surrounded by a group of white males?
- The pain of a woman who has planned a successful advertising campaign only to be fired once the campaign is launched?
- The fear of a man who knows he will lose his job if anyone discovers he is gay?
- The anger of a woman in her fifties who loses her job to a younger woman?
- The frustration of a senior engineer from Kazakhstan who is desperately trying to keep up with a course in English, his fourth language?
- The anger of a lesbian who is told she just hasn't met the right man?
- The rage of all sorts of people when someone like me says: 'I'm a straight white guy, so what has diversity got to do with me?'

No. I cannot really understand. But I'm working on it. And, whoever you are, you can work on it too. Each of us is subordinate only some of the time You know a lot about the down part of your life: you have to in order to survive. But you are also dominant.

Answer these three questions:

1 Do you know where you will sleep tonight
2 Do you know where you will eat today?
3 Do you have shoes?

If you answer yes to those three questions, then you are wealthier than the majority of people on this planet. That is difficult to remember because mos of us look up the ladder at the people who are better off than we are rathe than down the ladder at the many people who are worse off. That is why the Culture Visa' (which I developed with George Simons) includes wealth among the many factors among which we define ourselves culturally."

6. It's difference

Although I am rather tough on so-called 'typical' people, I am concerned that they can too easily become the scapegoat. History is not encouraging here. My persecuted Puritan ancestors. escaped from Europe - and set up their own exclusive religious communities in North America. So the answer is not to reverse the downs and the ups.

I have noticed that when I attack able-bodied people for being up, they become defensive, in the same way in which I become defensive when a woman attacks me for being up. (What me, defensive? I'm not defensive!)

So I keep learning to focus on difference whenever I can. I can be blind neither to up and down, nor to the money and power that reinforce that split. But I do not have to accept that situation as the only way. Sometimes we are not dominant or subordinate – just different.

Years ago, when I was working with students on a race-and-sex desegregation project, we did an outdoor training course. Eventually we came to a 12 ft wall. We had to get over the wall as a team. Suddenly, all sorts of differences became equally valuable. To get over that wall, we needed the athletic ones and the clever ones, the little ones and the big ones. Any wall that faces us can either stop us or challenge us to find a new way over.

I find the model of Social Construction and Appreciative Inquiry very helpful here. We construct society by the way we describe it. We have the power to choose which stories we tell about the past and which visions of the future we imagine. The Social Construction and Appreciative Inquiry research shows that almost all social advances are first described in Utopian writings. For example, nineteenth-century Utopians dared to imagine that women, people of all races, and people of all classes would be able to vote. We can dare to imagine that people of all kinds will be able to live together and learn together.

As the US anthropologist Margaret Mead said, 'Never doubt the ability of a small group of people to change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'

7. It's love

Many years ago my extended family had a painful day-long argument about the future of

our family farm. Late in the evening, my mother finally brought us all back together. Since I was just beginning to learn about working with groups, I asked her how she had managed to do that. She said, 'It's about love, isn't it?'

Recently I was thanking my mother for raising me so well and she said there really was not much to being a good parent: 'We just provide you with a good growing environment. And we love you.'

I think that describes what we as trainers do in T groups. It also describes what each person in the group does for everyone else. You and I offer ourselves as 'a good growing environment' for learning about diversity. The key to making it work is that when you and I challenge and confront each other,we each believe that the other person is worth the pain and the risk and the love.

Diversity in your own organization

Now that you have begun thinking about who you are yourself, you can begin thinking about the other people in your organization. Does your organization have people in every category who are different from you? If not, why not?

In the UK and in Europe in general, awareness of diversity often begins with nationality. Even within the UK, being Irish, Welsh, Scottish, or English makes quite a difference (particularly if there is a rugby international coming up). The difficulty with using nationality as a guide is that the stereotypes do not work all the time. When I studied in Scotland 30 years ago, I learned that the Scots do not consider themselves to be 'thrifty' or 'cheap' in the way that many outsiders do. But Scots do think of Aberdonians that way. That is,except for the Scots in Aberdeen.

Stereotypes do work occasionally. That is what makes them so dangerous. When I start assuming they will work all the time, I am heading for trouble.

When George Simons and I designed the Culture Visa, we outlined dozens of cultural differences. Some of the cultural differences tend to fit more in some cultures than in others. The trick is that a specific individual from any culture might behave quite differently from her or his colleagues. 'Tend' is a very important word whenever we discuss cultural differences.

Two of the cultural differences from the Culture Visa are shown in Figure 5.2. Note that at every point along each continuum there is someone who believes that this is the natural way to believe and behave.

If you are managing diversity effectively, you can make use of all the beliefs and all the behaviours in your organization, as well as in your customers, suppliers and other stakeholders.

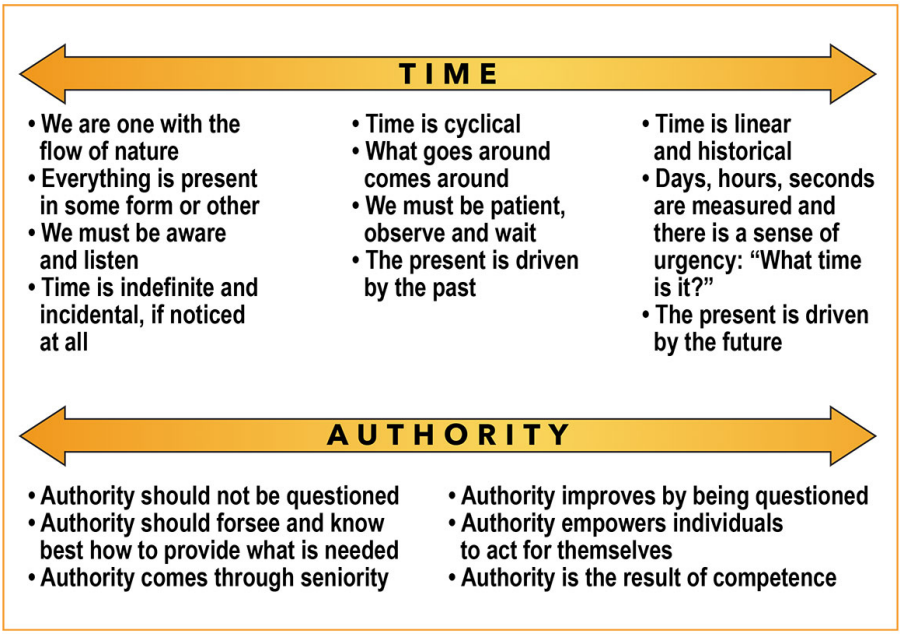

Figure 5.2 Two cultural differences from the *Culture Visa*. At any point along each continuum there is someone who believes that this is the natural way to believe and behave

Next steps

If you want to improve your effectiveness in managing diversity, then you will probably want to bring in consultants and trainers at some point. Remember that when you hire such people, your best option is to hire a team. Hire people who both match and challenge the 'typical' people in your own organization.

Also remember that people in this field work on a continuum. At one end are those who focus on the glories of multiculturalism and how our differences are a wonderful opportunity. At the other end are those who focus on the disasters of racism, sexism and other violations of social justice. If you personally feel more comfortable at one end of the continuum, that is an excellent reason for bringing in someone who is closer to the other end.

If you really want to manage diversity, then work with the consultants as part of the team – and keep the work going. Diversity, like quality and safety, is not something you can finish on a two-day training course. Even when the consultants leave, you and your colleagues will continue to manage diversity – or someone else will.

When I first began consulting work in this area almost twenty years ago, we often got an interesting range of responses to the issue of racism. At one end of

the continuum: 'I don't see colour. To me, everyone is the same.' At the other end: 'I see colour first, last, and always. To me, we are never the same.'

How easy it would have been to work at one end or the other. The difficulty is that sometimes colour does make a difference and sometimes it does not. It is ridiculous and offensive. to tell someone 'I don't see her or his colour'. It is equally ridiculous and offensive to tell someone I don't see her or his humanity.

So the question is: in this particular situation, which one is more important? As I promised at the beginning, when you are managing diversity you have many questions to answer for yourself. The questions are simple. The answers are not.

You may be thinking by now that all this sounds beyond your ability and beyond your responsibility. If people are going to start talking about social justice, what does that have to do with your company? After all, you are just here to make a profit.

One response is that if the companies of the world do not begin taking some responsibility for social justice then it is unlikely that any progress will be made and there may eventually be no customers to provide your profits.

Another response is that if the individual managers (like you) within organizations do not begin taking some responsibility for social justice then who will? So, here is your final question: What kind of an organization and what kind of a world do you choose to live in?"

Further reading

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