In a world that naturally evolves by using differentiation and restructuring to serve the overall system, it seems a bit odd that most organizations struggle so much with balancing the need for a holistic culture built on diverse members. This article presents relevant theory on systems thinking and the need for biodiversity, as well as obstacles to integration and how to overcome them.

Leveraging Diversity

Moving From Compliance to Performance

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A 1996 *Harvard Business Review* article highlighted various approaches most organizations take to "managing" diversity in the workplace. According to the authors Thomas and Ely (1996), two paradigms continue to remain predominant: First, diversity is a compliance issue and second, diversity is a means of gaining access to minority markets. Nearly a decade later, a third paradigm of integration is still rarely implemented to truly leverage diversity as a key business strategy. While the shift in thinking may be slow to manifest in many organizations, those that have made the jump are realizing real returns: increased innovation, reduced employee turnover, and increased flexibility and versatility in rapidly changing markets. Rather than viewing "diversity" as a business expense, integrative companies view diversity as a key strategy for reducing costs of attrition (an average of 150% of salary) to increasing revenues in expanding markets and innovative development.

Current Approaches: How Limited Thinking Limits Results

In order to consider the type of thinking that drives "integrative" behavior, it may be helpful to

consider the first two predominant paradigms. According to Thomas and Ely, the first limited perspective is the Assimilation Paradigm. This view is driven by the basic belief that discrimination is ethically wrong and everyone should be treated the same. The focus is on compliance with these basic beliefs, and decisions and behaviors are driven by basic values of harmony, tolerance, and equality. The implied goals are uniformity in behavior and processes. The value for fairness may go beyond compliance for the sake of avoiding negative consequences, and the results do often promote fair hiring practices and an increase in diversity, but the limited view has its own unintentional consequences. Often, when diversity is managed strictly from an ethical point of view, minorities may be hired but are expected to assimilate into the majority culture. Differences are discouraged in favor of similarity; conformity is the name of the game. Since differences are discouraged, so are disagreements. Tensions often escalate and minority employees may feel distrustful to think or behave authentically in such a culture.

The second predominant view on managing diversity is the Differentiation Paradigm. This view promotes legitimacy and access of diverse populations and is grounded in the basic belief that differences are good. In organizations, this paradigm enables a way to leverage diversity to access minority markets and new clients. Beyond merely tolerating differences, diversity itself is valued. There is an understanding of the benefit of specialization and cooperation. Again, the positive results are obvious: Markets are expanded and diverse work forces are increased. With diversity encouraged, specialty areas are developed.

However, as with the Assimilation Paradigm, there are potential pitfalls that can undermine such diversity efforts. In organizations driven by the Differentiation Paradigm, minority workers are often pigeonholed into specialty "niches" and stereotyped by their cultural background. The emphasis on cultural diversity rather than individuality (personality, skills, thinking styles) often results in the separation of minority employees from the mainstream business goals and functions. Minorities may feel used, exploited, and excluded from wider company operations and opportunities. Often, there is a high turnover of minority employees.

Integration: Beyond Compliance to Capacity

Rarely, a visionary organization will adopt and implement diversity initiatives driven by an Integration Paradigm. This view seeks to connect diversity to the core objectives and approaches to the organization's work. It is driven by the basic belief that a diverse work force is not enough; diversity must be integrated for optimal benefit. Those beliefs instill fundamental value for integrated diversity and equity even when structure does not lend to full "equality." There is a value for openness, curiosity, learning about alternatives, true collaboration, and a search for a goodness of fit among diverse individuals.

The resulting behaviors of these beliefs and values lead to increased performance, retention, and innovation, as follows:

- The culture supports the ability to question "status quo" and operating norms through various perspectives. Teams learn new approaches to tasks as individuals draw on cultural background to drive decision making and processes.
- Flexibility and adaptability are developed by utilizing and leveraging diverse skills and perspectives in the mainstream work of the organization.
- There is increased commitment of minority staff who feel valued for their contributions.
- Finally, there is a unity of commitment, objectives, and alignment of the organization's goals while simultaneously valuing diverse approaches to them.

Moving to the Third Paradigm of Integration

Systems research teaches us how natural systems evolve through a process of increased differentiation and increased organization. As a system evolves, individual parts become increasingly diverse and specialized in order to perform specific tasks that serve the purpose of the system. As they become increasingly specialized, they also become arranged in meaningful and useful relationships with other components of a system. As this happens, a system becomes more organized and indivisible—it evolves and becomes more whole. The law of requisite variety states that a system's components must be at least as diverse as its containing environment in order to create sustainability and stability (Christakis, 1996, 2001; Morgan, 1998). We seem to be gaining more awareness and understanding of the necessity of biodiversity to sustain an ecosystem, but we really seem to be stuck when trying to apply this valuable principle within our organizational systems.

Hopefully, real understanding of "oneness" or "wholeness" of a group will evolve by understanding

these principles. Yes, an organization's culture can act in oneness as a whole—but that wholeness and oneness are best served by a diverse membership. Predominant perceptions about diversity present some challenges for our contemporary organizational settings and warrant some reflective consideration.

Getting Cultured

Physicist and evolutionary theorist Ervin Laszlo (1996) explains that all natural systems (ecological, biological, etc.), because of their future-seeking, evolutionary nature, revolve around certain inherent values: to utilize our physical environments for energy and to sustain ourselves by responding and adapting to those environments. "You must keep yourself running against the odds of the physical decay of all things, and to do so you must perform the necessary repairs, including (if you are a very complex system) the ultimate one of replacing your entire system by reproducing it." (p. 79). These are values common to all natural systems, Laszlo explains, and no system can deny them for too long because a reversal would eventually lead to increased entropy—disorganization—and inevitable decay.

Humans learn, create, and adopt additional values. Our social systems also develop values according to their knowledge, insights, language, technology, and so on, which guide their ways of knowing, of being, and of doing. These values evolve into our human cultures. In groups, culture emerges as different ways of knowing, being, and doing that reinforce the meaning and understanding of the world and one's place within it and reinforce and define the values that support that understanding. Those values are transmitted efficiently and effectively in groups of humans through their culture. Culture emerges in human systems as a value-guided system (Banathy 1996, 2000; Laszlo, 1996) even if those values are not explicitly defined, and most often they are not.

> "Cultures are, in the final analysis, value-guided systems. [...] Values define cultural man's need for rationality, meaningfulness in emotional experience, richness of imagination, and depth of faith. All cultures respond to such suprabiological values. But in what form they do so depends on the specific kind of values people happen to have." Laszlo, 1996. (pp. 75-76)

Culture is the product of individual minds expressed as shared meaning, values, and purpose within the whole of a group. It is very often hidden and unpredictable. It can be nurtured, but not controlled. "The metaphor helps us to rethink almost every aspect of corporate functioning," Morgan (1998) notes, "including strategy, structure, design, and the nature of leadership and management. Once we understand culture's influence on workplace behaviors, we realize organizational change is cultural change and that all aspects of corporate transformation can be approached with this perspective in mind." (p. 111)

Culture is a uniquely human phenomenon and where people gather, culture emerges. It is as inevitable as death and taxes.

Not only is culture unique to humans, we have also acquired the ability to discern the value of different things—including the value of our values themselves. We alone judge whether or not our values are of value. In early nomadic tribes, a group of people would discover that by working, they were more likely to survive. Cooperation became valued. During the European Renaissance, aesthetic purposes gained value as evidenced by the emergence of the integration of art into the culture. Under the influence of notorious leaders like Genghis Khan, some cultures developed a value for control and power, and that value had even higher value than life itself. Different geographic areas evolved different cultures based on values that were most important to them. They acted on those values in different ways as well. Similar cultures often disagreed on how to act on the same value, evolving separate political and governmental systems.

Even if a group, community, or organization is comprised of members belonging to only one societal culture, diversity is still evident by the unique experiences and ideas of each individual and by how much outside cultural beliefs have influenced the individual. Different cultures readily integrate and with modern transportation and communication, information, ideas, and knowledge pass through cultural boundaries all the time. If knowledge or an idea passes to one particular member of a culture, it may impact that individual's belief system and affect how he or she chooses to behave in various situations. If one individual survives an accident or illness, but is left with physical disabilities, his/her unique experience will also impact and mold his/her personal value system. The individual's interaction and relationships with others in his/her social systems will have at least some impact.

So we can understand that as diverse as the world's cultures are, they are comprised of equally diverse individuals. One can imagine the potential clash of ideologies and beliefs in a social system comprised of people from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and cultures. Actually, we don't have to imagine the conflict—most of us experience it regularly as our contemporary society becomes more mobile and local groups, communities, and organizations are increasingly made up of people from diverse ethnic, religious, political, and socioeconomic cultures.

Obstacles to Integration

Fortunately, these differences afford our organizations an unprecedented variety of knowledge, skills, and ideas that, when integrated, are capable of achieving much more than any single individual can. It becomes easy to learn to value diversity when a unique perspective is able to bring real and significant benefit to a particular issue or problem. However, we must first be open to receive those perspectives. Yet largely, our personal and cultural experiences have not taught most of us to value these differences. In fact, most of us have learned to fear them. As individuals, we seem to hold some natural preference to be with people we perceive as being "like us." After all, people like us hold similar values, reinforcing for us our sense of meaning and purpose. Those who are different may challenge that meaning, and since the need for meaning is so fundamental, the preference is perfectly reasonable. In some cases, however, those preferences escalate to prejudice, which is an attitude with a closed mind. For instance, we may observe patterns of behavior or characteristics demonstrated by certain groups of people and based on those observed patterns, respond or react to individual members of those groups based on those observed patterns, or even erroneously perceive patterns based on information we have accepted from others.

The Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith notes that such experiences suggest "that prejudgments may stand even when available evidence is against them." (From a grade school social studies handout adapted from Gordon Allport's, *ABC's of Scapegoating*. New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.) Prejudice alone may not cause specific harm, except perhaps to limit a person's or group's willingness to be open to potential benefits of considering and integrating diverse perspectives. However, as so many of us know,

prejudice sometimes leads to harmful discrimination and even violent oppression. Perhaps once we become aware of the nature of our differences and the potential value our diversity offers, we can also finally realize that striving for tolerance alone is an inadequate solution to the conflicts that arise from our differences. Unity, "oneness," and wholeness within our social systems can't be equated with "sameness" under a systems paradigm. And as reflected by Peck (1987), "Even if one world meant a melting pot where everything becomes a bland mush, instead of a salad of varied textures and flavors, I'm not sure the outcome would be palatable." (p. 20)

For those who still may be thinking to themselves, "So which is it, Stalinski? If diversity is such a good thing, then why are you so hot to help us create shared meaning and work to find areas of common ground?" It's quite simple and bears repeating: "Commonness" does not equate with "sameness." It may not even mean "equal." But finding and creating shared meaning and finding common ground from which to build enables us all to learn and grow. Our differences are not "competitive." Even "equality" suggests a hierarchical mindset that associates equality with sameness. Vogl and Jaros (1998) suggest this is a misunderstanding and misuse of Aristotle's "law of the excluded middle," which they suggest has inappropriately evolved into a principle of "exclusivity of opposites."

According to this principle, complex systems must be classified into opposing groups on the basis of only one (and generally not even the most important) of their characteristics. There are simply no possibilities for anything to exist between those two groups. Thus they have to be classified in opposing groups— men/women, blacks/whites, clever/stupid, disabled/able bodied, etc. The differences are then taken out of context and exaggerated. [...] It is basically incorrect to regard complex systems, which display some opposite characteristics as being opposites. People tend to take such information at face value, acting in completely inappropriate ways. Vogl and Jaros, 1998. (p. 5)

Instead, Kathia Laszlo points out that an understanding of systems thinking easily reconciles what only appear to be contradictions:

[S]ystems thinking transcends both reductionism and holism. Systems thinking implies the understanding of the complementarity and unity of "apparent opposites" and of the interactions that join them, instead of focusing on the competitive characteristics that exist

between them. Therefore, apparent opposites—such as men and women, East and West, self and other, mind and body, reason and emotion, science and spirituality, society and ecosystem—are interdependent complements that can coexist in harmonious balance and diversified unity under the systems paradigm. (2000, unpublished)

Vogl and Jaros agree, "The creative collaboration between two complex systems or processes have common and opposing characteristics. We should begin teaching this important principle early in life to avoid difficulties and even disasters which stem from inappropriate applications of Aristotle's law of excluded middle." (p. 5) Just as Laszlo rightly points out that systems thinking transcends notions of reductionism and holism, unity in diversity transcends concepts of commonalties and differences.

Inclusion: Evaluating "Goodness of Fit"

Finally, it seems important to reiterate the systems perspective on the inclusion of diversity. Natural systems do not "keep" and "include" everything that happens to become a part of its internal environment. When our biological systems acquire a useful evolutionary quality, like an eye, it might include and integrate that quality. But if that same biological system acquires a virus, it won't try to keep it and integrate it. Inclusion and integration happen when there is a "goodness of fit" between a new system element (in the case of human systems such as our organizations, this would be a new person or perspective) and the purpose of the system itself. I've seen groups destroyed because they insist on being totally inclusive, to the extreme of allowing harmful influences of individuals who are not serving the ultimate purpose of the group itself. Likewise, in the case of an organization trying to include and integrate values brought by the diverse perspectives of many ethnic cultures, instead of evaluating each of these values for its relevance to the purpose of the organization, they are included (or rejected) arbitrarily.

The choice of a group not to adopt certain cultural values or perspectives does not mean that an individual member has to give up that value, only that it may not apply in the context of a specific community. We all belong to a multitude of interconnected social systems, and participation in one does not mean we have to "give up" another. Many American families continue to celebrate their former ethnic heritage and cultural traditions but still take great pride in being a part of American society. It is possible to hold multiple perspectives at the same time, reflected in the diverse cultures of which we are a part. Again, goodness of fit will determine whether this diversity causes conflict, either on an individual internal level or within the cultures themselves. Learning to evaluate goodness of fit and test for congruency seems critical to creating harmony among individual and collective interconnected cultural values.

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