

Working Across Differences: Diversity Practices for Organizational Change¹

Increasingly, accomplishing organizational goals and activities depends on interactions that occur among people who belong to different social identity groups, be it race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, religion, nationality, and other differences. A Caucasian manager buys services from a “minority” vendor; a young white woman is mentored by an older white man; a Latina professor teaches white students; a Muslim worker is supervised by her Catholic supervisor; a gay white man travels on business with his heterosexual, Asian male colleague; and the list goes on.

Groups in organizations also experience this need to work across differences and the difficulties of doing so: the women’s network in Acme² is challenged by the Asian and Latina members to share power by including more women of color in their leadership and to ensure that their needs are addressed in the network’s program; the human resource manager is disappointed that the Cubans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans, the largest Latino groups at ABCD, are not strongly supporting the newly offered Hispanic leadership development workshop; and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) caucus at XYZ Company fears that senior management’s offer to attend their first meeting to show support will cause GLBT employees to avoid the meeting, so as to protect themselves from having to “come out” to the organization.

For the last three years, the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) at the Simmons School of Management has been conducting research and convening groups of academics, managers, and change agents to identify concepts and

practices to facilitate working across the many differences found in today’s organizations. While successful at initiating change in a wide range of national and international organizations to meet the *dual agenda* of advancing gender equity and improving performance through a *small wins* strategy,³ CGO has learned that small wins dissipate quickly if they lack a constituency and infrastructure for sustaining and institutionalizing them. One of the main barriers to sustaining these changes has been the challenge of working across differences. Thus, we are interested in finding ways to encourage the coming together of members of different social identity groups invested in and supportive of long-term change efforts from within.

When we began this work, we imagined we could easily translate a wealth of conflict resolution approaches to the challenge of building diverse internal (and external) constituencies to support a dual agenda of social equity and organizational effectiveness. Instead, in the process of reviewing the literature and in trying to apply it to organizations, we found that most existing negotiation and coalition models—dominated by economic, legal, and psychological theories—had limited applicability to the identity group splits we had identified. This was the case for several reasons. First, the individualistic and rationalistic assumptions that underlie most economic and psychological models of negotiation and coalition building generally ignore power dynamics, particularly the asymmetry among different groups, not just because of organizational location, but also based on identity. In our work with international organizations, for example, differential access to resources,

often based on geography and ethnicity, creates barriers to working together that most models of negotiation cannot address. In addition, these models generally ignore the impact that membership in and identification with specific identity groups have in shaping people’s interests and expectations about the possibilities of building alliances.

The New Problem Without a Name

The organizational challenges we began to identify and explore revealed that working across differences, while easy to envision, is quite difficult in the practice of organizational life. In work interactions between people of different social identities, many fears and myths erode the potential for productive alliances: peers do not confront each other for fear of being accused of being racist, sexist, or homophobic; mentoring relations among men and women wither for fear they would be construed as romantic liaisons; work relations between whites and minorities are covered with a caution born out of fear to confront the dynamics of differential power that inevitably manifest themselves in supervising, collegial, and team relations at work, however subtly or blatantly these are experienced.

These individual dynamics are exacerbated in groups. For example, a group may fear that another group will get more resources, prestige, and rewards than their group, or a group may fear that they will be used for the other group’s purpose. Or members of a non-dominant group, like Latinos, may fear that if they ally with other Latinos, they will lose the respect of their white colleagues. In addition, many employee networks end up working in segregated “silos,” unwilling

to share their accomplishments and best practices, even while they all aspire to work toward more equitable and productive workplaces. Other affinity groups limit themselves to narrow agendas of individual development that support the career advancement of their officers, while diminishing the broader agendas that would benefit their membership at large.

While many organizations could continue to ignore and avoid addressing the impact that social differences have in today's work environment, we consistently hear that people want to engage more fully in order to work more effectively. Instead of working in segregated groups, members want to collaborate. Instead of working in organizations that actively or passively discourage working across differences, many people and groups want their organizations to actively support their work with each other. What guidance can be provided for those who want to engage more fully in working across differences?

Concepts and Practices for Working Within and Across Differences

We have identified key concepts and specific practices to support building alliances across differences in organizations. The concepts are *simultaneity* and *stance*. First, working across differences requires an understanding of social identities as fluid. The concept of *simultaneity* involves recognizing that identities are multiple and constructed in relation to others, as opposed to fixed, unitary, and essential. Recognizing multiple identities thus opens up the possibility of building alliances that go beyond one narrowly defined identity and interest by creating new and bridging identities to pursue specific change goals. For example, in an organization we work with, Hispanics from a diversity of nationalities and places of origin, religions, and educational backgrounds are coming together under a newly accepted "Latino" identity to advocate for changes to increase their opportunities for advancement, recognition, and contributions to the organization.

Second, we have found that a position or stance of inquiry is integral to being able

to engage with differences. By *stance* we mean an orienting position about how a person presents her/himself to others and how s/he takes in experiences and information from others. A successful stance for working across differences requires openness to learning, inquiring, and being moved by others, as well as clarity about what is non-negotiable and absolutely necessary for the alliance to work for one's beliefs. We have observed how alliances among women in organizations flounder because members do not take a stance of inquiry; that is, exploring and learning about the other group and the specifics of their context in a deep way. For example, demands by white women for flexible hours and child care benefits are often met with a cold reception from Latina and African American women. What seems like an obvious alliance on the apparently universal "women's issue" of family responsibilities, care, and work does not generate the support white women expect. But when white, Latina, and African American women discuss these issues from a stance of inquiry, they come to understand their very different approaches and needs. That is, while, in general, white women tend to resolve their family-care demands by accessing services and delegating the care-taking role to hired help, many women of color tend to access their community and family networks to find care for their children and elders. Women of color may be more interested in areas where they feel they are most negatively and immediately impacted, for example, mentoring and advancement opportunities.

The stance a person takes is very much influenced by their organizational role—manager, consultant, peer, friend—and the context in which the alliance is occurring—interpersonal, group, organizational, personal, and societal. Thus, while as close colleagues and friends at work, three women—one white, one Asian, and one African American—may share stories about their work-life balance challenges over lunch, in the context of a formal organizational meeting with senior management, the positions they take and the priorities they are willing to work for may be quite different. It is because of

this complexity that we think it is useful to delineate specific practices that support working across differences.

We use the term *practices* in order to capture the notion of processes and actions that involve *reflecting, thinking, and doing*. Below we outline concrete practices that individuals and groups can engage in to promote working across differences.

Create a real connection. Working across differences calls for a process of learning about others in terms of their concrete histories, identities, emotions, needs, and aspirations instead of presuming that there is a "generalized other."⁴ Although there are always instrumental reasons for parties to form alliances with each other, we have found that working across differences requires a more intensive and authentic kind of connection. It involves a commitment to inquiry based on the belief that you cannot engage with someone you do not know and whose experiences you do not understand.⁵ This stance also calls for reflexivity—reflection to enhance both self-awareness and a critical understanding of how power and cultural legacies can make working across differences difficult. Mutuality is critical to this kind of interaction. By mutuality we mean that both parties change as a result of their connection and mutual learning.

There are many ways in which real connections across differences can be made, but in the context of everyday work-life we find that well-designed processes such as appreciative inquiry interviews⁶ are useful in providing an opportunity for members to reflect on and share what is important to them about their work, their values, and their organization. In a project with six international organizations, CGO used this process to help the members of a newly formed collaborative learn about each other and begin to build common ground. We asked each of the twelve members to interview another person they did not know well. Each member then introduced their interviewed partner to the larger group by telling a story about them based on key insights from the questions explored. In this way, a deep connection was established not only between the part-

ners, but also among all the members, based on the sharing of values, challenges, and stories that surfaced both commonalities and differences.

Build interdependence. In traditional negotiation strategies, each party's stance is often understood to be immutable, in that each party focuses only on what they need and want. Each party's success is thus measured by their skill at being able to independently negotiate for the needs of their party, without being influenced by the other. Relational interdependence, as we use the term, refers to a relationship where, through a stance of inquiry, parties begin to see their fates as connected to each other. Parties thus enter a negotiation open to hearing and learning from one another. The telling and retelling of stories—narratives of experience, or success and failure—helps foster a kind of connection that is quite different from the relationship between two parties in a traditional negotiation. Indeed, as is illustrated in the vignette about the AltiCorp Company (see page 4), these kinds of stories can lead over time to redefinitions of the problems and issues that brought people together in the first place.

Equalize power. Identity group relations are inevitably characterized by power dynamics. Groups who are dominant—because of gender, race, geography, ethnicity, sexual identity, and/or class—are often oblivious to how power dynamics shape their interactions.⁷ Groups are not equally positioned or empowered to speak of their interests or conditions for joining an alliance or coalition. We have observed that while dominant groups in organizations tend to propose strategies to form alliances for change, “minority” groups do not necessarily share this “rush” to joining and instead may want to focus on exploring the differences more deeply.⁸

The power dynamics that shape relationships and make alliance building difficult are not always obvious. Many times, these processes of power are located in the less visible discourses that shape how people think and talk. Focusing on that talk and attending to silences can give important insights into why the alliance is not mov-

ing ahead. The *problematic moment approach (PMA)* is one way to attend to breakdowns in a group's “talk.”⁹ It can help individuals understand the societal discourses they themselves enact, thereby uncovering how their own ways of thinking and talking constrain what they want to do. It also reveals how power and identity show up in the process of working across differences in concrete tasks in real time.

A proactive way of helping to equalize power dynamics is for identity groups working across differences to design *rules of engagement*, that is, guidelines or processes that help avoid unwittingly enacting behaviors that exploit historical privilege and reproduce power imbalances.¹⁰ These kinds of processes and guidelines can empower parties who might remain silent, and whose interests and values therefore go unarticulated, to find a voice to bring in their perspectives and experiences. An example of how to establish rules of engagement comes from the collaborative of international organizations mentioned before. The group, with the help of the facilitators, agreed on a set of guidelines to support transparency and equity in the future operations of the collaborative, which included equal utilization and distribution of monetary resources, joint ownership of the products that came out of the group's work, and the use of languages other than English in the deliberations of the group.

Attend to and diagnose group dynamics. It is important to understand the complexity of the group dynamics between different identity groups in order to work across differences. There is often a tendency, however, to focus only on intergroup relationships when we diagnose why an alliance is or is not successful. Yet intra-group relations can play as important a role in the success or failure of an alliance. Taking the risk to ask difficult questions is one way to open up space for discussing intra-group controversies. Karen Proudford observed that in her work with two groups, one almost exclusively white and the other black, it was a white woman's question—“How far down the path of understanding differ-

ences does one have to get before you start to understand the sameness?”—that revealed the intra-group tensions that were hidden and enacted in the silence, tensions, and disjunctures between the white women's and the black women's subgroups. “[T]he dividing line across race [became] less stark,” allowing women to agree that both agendas were needed—learning about and addressing racial issues and differences as well as taking up the gender issues that were common to both groups.¹¹

Work iteratively. Working across differences is not a linear process, but an iterative one that moves between similarity and difference as the basis for alliance building in organizations. We propose the following flow:

- Begin with likely supporters for an attainable concrete project or vision to articulate common interests or demands.
- Use inquiry and story telling to connect and understand the issues and concerns at a deeper level.
- Work through the paradox of trust by identifying and working for tangible (material or structural) and intangible (cultural or symbolic) interests to promote interdependence.
- Establish rules of engagement to manage and equalize power differentials to enhance inquiry and action.
- Discover new shared goals and values by asking the difficult questions.

Rather than a linear process that has beginning and end points, this process is not fixed or stable. Thus, it requires continuous enactment and a feedback loop. One outcome will be to move the group from a stance where the politics of identity—solidarity based on membership in a particular social group—are the only possible way to connect with others, to the politics of identification, where a shared vision or goal, uncovered through inquiry in the context of a relationship, becomes the basis for an alliance that brings positive change to many.

For example, at the AltiCorp Company, the gay and lesbian caucus group, an initial group of likely supporters, made the case for domestic partner benefits for gays and lesbians in the company by engaging with members across other social differences to explain the importance of these benefits for gays and lesbians. In the process, they also educated the company about several needs of and challenges faced by gays and lesbians in an organization where the culture and practices are based on heterosexual norms. The human resources department used this opportunity to survey the entire organization in order to test whether the current benefits package was meeting the needs of most employees, thus engaging in further inquiry. The survey results indicated that the majority of the employees did not live in a family composed of a primary breadwinner whose benefits supported a spouse and two children, which is the prevalent assumption behind traditional benefits packages. In the process of sharing this information, different groups—including Latino and African American families, single-parent families, heterosexual unmarried partners, and families with aging parents at home—began to see that what had started as a “gay and lesbian issue” also affected them. Interdependence was created through inquiry. An issue that began as a call for domestic partner benefits for gays and lesbians won large support when it was shown that a revamping of the traditional benefits package would be good for the majority of the organization’s employees; a new shared goal was achieved that included tangible benefits and the intangible learning about the family needs of different groups of workers.¹²

Conclusion

As work organizations have become increasingly diverse, we have seen that tra-

ditional diversity initiatives—such as affinity or caucus groups, diversity training, new recruitment and workplace policies, for example—do not go far enough to promote working within and across social identity differences to help organizations become more effective and more equitable. The concepts and practices outlined in this briefing note can help organizations achieve their bottom line *and* be more supportive of their employees. Herein lays the real promise of the new diverse workforce.

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Endnotes

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² All organizational references in this briefing note are fictitious to protect the confidentiality of clients.

³ Meyerson, D. and J.K. Fletcher. 2000. A modest manifesto for shattering the glass ceiling. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February: 127-136. The small-wins approach to change was developed by Karl Weick. See Weick, K. 1994. Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems. *American Psychologist*, 39: 40-49.

⁴ Benhabib, S. 1992. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, “Chapter 5: The Generalized and the Concrete Other,” 148-177. New York: Routledge.

⁵ Center for Gender in Organizations. 2003. *Working with Our Differences: Chasms, Bridges, Alliances?: Report of an International Conference*. Boston, MA. Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management, 5-11.

⁶ Appreciative inquiry is a process that identifies high points of performance and achievement rather than the problems an organization faces, thus creating energy that allows the organization to envision possibilities for change. See Hammond, S.A. 1996. *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*. Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Co.

⁷ Peggy McIntosh’s pathbreaking article highlights these dynamics. In order to make her own white privilege visible and tangible, she discusses 50 advantages that she experiences on a daily basis as a white person in the United States. See McIntosh, P. 1990. White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, Winter: 31-34.

⁸ Scully, M., E. Holvino, K. Proudford, and M. Piore. 2001. “Bridges Over Troubled Waters: ‘Experiments’ in Working Across Differences.” Presentation at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Washington, DC.

⁹ Cumming, J. and E. Holvino. 2001. “The Problematic Moment Approach to Off-Line Reflection and Organizational Learning.” Presentation at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Washington, DC. See also the Chaos Management website, www.chaosmanagement.com.

¹⁰ Chesler, M. 2000. “Promises and Dilemmas of Coalitions from Varied Perspectives: Latina/Latino Political Organizing in Boston and the Role of White Men in Multicultural Coalitions.” CGO 2000-2001 Seminar Series, Boston, MA. See seminar summary, www.simmons.edu/som/cgo/promises.pdf.

¹¹ Proudford, K. 2002. *CGO Insights No. 14, Asking the Question: Uncovering the Assumptions that Undermine Conversations Across Race*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, 3; and Thomas, D. 2002. “Racial Taboos and the Dynamics of Leadership.” CGO 2001-2002 Seminar Series, Boston, MA. See seminar summary, www.simmons.edu/som/cgo/racial_taboos.pdf.

¹² Scully, M. and W.E.D. Creed. 1999. Restructured families: Issues of equality and need. *The Annals of the American Academy*. 562 (March): 51-54.

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Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO)
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