

# Seeking common ground: an alternative diversity training paradigm

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – During a typical diversity program, participants are encouraged to recognize, evaluate, and appreciate differences. The purpose of this paper is to explore the rationale for “Conversity<sup>®</sup>”: an alternative approach to diversity training that is based on connections.

**Design/methodology approach** – The paper is based on a review of the literature on “traditional” diversity training paradigms, the impact of diversity on the brain, and basic social psychology concepts such as categorization and social affiliation. The authors relate literature review findings to their experiences conducting “connections-based” (“Conversity”) diversity training.

**Findings** – The human brain is already wired to perceive differences. Further, human beings tend to prefer others who share their group affiliations. Possible consequences of “typical” diversity training programs may include a “backlash” against diversity, an increase in participants’ fears, and a reinforcement of inter-group divisions.

**Practical implications** – This paper offers practitioners an alternative paradigm for diversity training design including alternative categorization (i.e. emphasis on non-traditional diversity categories such as personality or team color) and an intentional search for connections between participants.

**Originality/value** – Historically, diversity training programs have focused on the value of differences rather than on the power of common ground.

**Keywords** Diversity training, Human resources, Intercultural relations, Prejudice, Discrimination, Team effectiveness, Diversity management, Human resource management

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

People say that it can't work – Black and White. Where here we make it work every day. We have our disagreements, of course, but before we reach for hate, always, always, we remember the Titans (Bruckheimer and Yakin, 2000).

The Arts seem to get it. Logic even dictates it. However, many trainers, businesses, and government agencies do not practice it. The key to it – i.e. getting diverse groups to work with one another – may not lie in the awareness of differences. Differences, in most cases, are already apparent anyway. Instead, the key to effectiveness in diverse interactions could lie in finding connections. Here are a few memorable examples from the arts:

- In a scene from the musical *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein (1949), ensign Nellie Forbush and French plantation owner Emille de Becque feel the first pangs of attraction. Nellie wonders whether they will ever fit in spite of their differences. She sings: “We are not alike, probably I'd bore him, he's a cultured Frenchman, I'm a little hick”.
- In the cartoon *Shrek*, Princess Fiona and the ogre Shrek are able to “live happily ever after” once Fiona discovers that she too is an ogre (Adamson and Jenson, 2001).

- The iconic children's song *It's a Small World After All* suggests to listeners: "There's so much that we share that its time we're aware, it's a small world after all" (Sherman and Sherman, 1964).
- The hugely popular *High School Musical* series teaches young audiences: "We're all in this together, when we reach, we can fly, know inside, we can make it" (Borden *et al.*, 2006).

The "Arts approach" to diversity, therefore, emphasizes the search for common ground. Any perceived differences between Nellie and Emille seem to separate rather than unite them. Shrek and Fiona find a connection in their "ogreness". High School Musicals' "Brainiac" and "Jock" cliques eat separately and live separate lives – until they learn that they're "all in this together".

The "business" approach to diversity training, however, seems to focus on differences. Indeed, traditional diversity training underscores:

- gaining awareness of how differences affect us;
- increasing our knowledge of cultural differences; and
- enhancing our skills as we relate to those whom we perceive as different (Diversity Training University International, 2004).

"Differences", therefore, are the common denominator, something we need to recognize, understand, and appreciate.

This article suggests an alternative paradigm for diversity training. Such a paradigm – "Conversity<sup>®</sup>" (Wildermuth and Gray, 2005) – focuses on the intentional building of commonalities rather than differences. The following sections:

- revisit the "official" business case for diversity training;
- address the impact of conventional diversity training on human relations; and
- connect the "Conversity" paradigm to the functioning of the human brain.

### The business case for diversity training

The "official" business case for diversity training in the USA has emphasized different aspects, and thus different training techniques, depending on the era. For instance, diversity training in the 1960s and 1970s was a reaction to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This seminal piece of legislation prohibited discriminatory employment practices based on race, color, religion, gender, or national origin (Smith *et al.*, 2004). Thus, the first round of diversity training programs in the USA mostly sought to avoid costly and embarrassing lawsuits and negative publicity (Anand and Winters, 2008). Indeed, concerns with diversity related litigation still provide the main reason for US businesses to do diversity training (Kerckhove, 2009).

During the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration "decreased focus" on compliance with the Civil Rights Act. Consequently, the business case for diversity training changed. The objective now was to help women and other minorities fit into the existing corporate cultures (Anand and Winters, 2008). For instance, the landmark publication of the *Workforce 2000* report (Johnston, 1987) challenged American businesses to reconcile "the conflicting needs of women, work, and families" and to integrate "Black and Hispanic workers fully into the economy" (p. 105).

The late 1990s brought a "paradigm shift" (Anand and Winters, 2008, p. 362) to organizational diversity training efforts. The focus moved from "diversity" to "inclusion". The term "inclusion" meant "creating organizational environments that work for everyone" (Anand and Winters, 2008, p. 362).

While "inclusion" and "diversity" are often used interchangeably, practitioners and organizations have also sought to differentiate the terms. For instance, Sylvia Ann Hewlett

Associates (2010) suggested that while “diversity naturally exists in most multinational companies” (p. 2) the same could not be said for inclusion. “Inclusion” thus had to do with making “the most” of diversity. They went on to say that “the rich variety of skill sets, points of view, different thought processes and new approaches that can unleash the potential for innovative ideas is useless if a company lacks the willingness to hear those ideas” (p. 2).

A similar distinction between “diversity” and “inclusion” was offered in the Newell Rubbermaid webpage:

The word diversity represents a large group comprised of different people with different experiences. These differences include race, color, religion, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, veteran status and citizenship. However, “diversity” does not address how these different people function or work together within the company. Inclusion enables us to strive to have all people represented and included in the Newell Rubbermaid family, and make all employees feel welcomed and valued, not only for their abilities, but also for their unique qualities and perspectives (Newell Rubbermaid, 2003-2009).

Such wording, however, does not seem to support a new paradigm. Instead, “inclusion” could represent an “old wine in a new bottle” – the same old paradigm repackaged. After all, inclusion discussions still relate to “different thought processes” (Sylvia Ann Hewlett Associates, 2010) and “unique qualities and perspectives” (Newell Rubbermaid, 2003-2009). In other words, “inclusion” still focuses on “differences”.

### The impact of the typical diversity training

While the diversity vocabulary has changed, the actual impact of diversity training on business diversity is yet uncertain. For instance, Dobbin and Kalev (2007) analyzed the influence of various initiatives (such as affirmative action plans, diversity training, and diversity evaluations) on the increase of the racial and gender diversity of managers. Such increase matters because “firms that add minorities in top positions see faster growth of blacks in lower level management” (Dobbin and Kalev, p. 294).

Dobbin and Kalev’s (2007) findings, however, failed to support a positive connection between diversity training and managerial racial/gender. Interestingly, diversity training had a negative effect on the numbers of African American female managers. Later, Kalev (cited in Vedantam, 2008) suggested that mandatory diversity training for managers could cause a backlash against diversity.

Such backlash was illustrated by Kerckhove’s (2009) description of how an average employee (a fictional man named John) might feel entering a diversity training session. John was forced by his boss to attend the training and told he had to make up lost time. Since John believed that he was not a racist he felt the training was unnecessary (Kerckhove, 2009). John, however, was about to discover why the training mattered as the facilitator shared the following information:

According to recent studies, America’s workforce is changing and rapidly growing more diverse. Over the next few decades, the largest percentage of new growth will be composed of women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. The number of employees with disabilities will also increase (Streeter, 2010).

John’s facilitator is not alone. Indeed, the “increase” in women and minorities is a common element of the “business case” for diversity in organizations. For instance, Sylvia Ann

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Hewlett Associates (2010) argued: “Right now, 83% of the global talent pool consists of women and minorities. Also, women are increasingly outnumbering men in college graduating classes worldwide” (p. 2).

An increase in the numbers of women and minorities in the workplace, however, is hardly good news for a non-minority male employee. After all, the company might be expected to meet diversity quotas in order to “match” the makeup of the outside population. John might conceivably perceive his job to be in jeopardy.

John’s fictional case might explain a common frustration experienced by diversity trainers. At the end of a typical diversity workshop, the trainer might feel that he/she has “preached to the choir”. The same participants felt positive about diversity at the beginning and at the end of the day. Nothing has changed.

A more troubling possibility, however, involves a change for the worse. Participants like John might start the day feeling indifferent about diversity. They might truly have never given it a thought. By the end of the training, these same participants might feel threatened and afraid.

The possibility of such a “diversity backlash” could be partly explained by Bennett’s (1993) Intercultural Sensitivity Model. Bennett, a well-known interculturalist, observed that “intercultural sensitivity is not natural” (p. 21). In fact, the purpose of intercultural education might be precisely to alter a human being’s “natural” protective behaviors.

According to Bennett’s model, people move through various developmental stages, ranging from “denial” of differences to full “integration” (Bennett, 1986, p. 182). These stages are:

1. *Denial* – differences have not yet been encountered and, therefore, do not exist.
2. *Defense* – differences are encountered and perceived as a threat.
3. *Minimization* – differences are “minimized” and trivialized.
4. *Acceptance* – differences are accepted and perceived as fundamental to the human condition.
5. *Adaptation* – behaviors and thought processes are adapted as individuals attempt to connect to differences.
6. *Integration* – individuals integrate differences within their own thinking and behavioral patterns (i.e. a person is able to “construe him or herself in various cultural ways”) (Bennett, 1986, p. 186).

Thus, a person is unlikely to move from “ignorance” of differences (denial) to complete multiculturalism (integration) without first experiencing diversity as a threat (Bennett, 1986). Once a threat is identified, a diversity trainer would be ill advised to reinforce it. Instead, Bennett recommends that trainers facilitate movement towards the “minimization” stage by emphasizing “what is generally ‘good’ in all cultures” (p. 189). Furthermore, Bennett warns that any attempt to “skip stages” (for instance, moving an individual from “denial” directly into “acceptance” or “adaptation”) may backfire, leading to a “strengthening of the Defense stage and rejection of further development” (p. 189).

## Diversity and the brain

Our brains are wired to make meaning quickly (Gazzaniga, 2008). Perceived items are listed in categories. After all, the brain would go crazy trying to deal with all the information that it processes in a day. Additionally, the brain is “basically lazy”. It will do the least amount of work it can. Thus, the “default” brain mode involves the use of easy and fast “intuitive modules” (Gazzaniga, 2008, p. 128). Such modules allow us to make efficient decisions.

A key “brain” decision has to do with social affiliation. Human beings, after all, are “social to the core” (Gazzaniga, 2008, p. 83). People have a natural tendency to identify themselves within certain parameters: club membership, clan affiliations, religious affiliations, company

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affiliations, political affiliations, specific sporting team fan, and other affiliations too numerous to mention in addition to sex, religion, race, economic standing, and culture.

When typical diversity trainers bring up the topic of “differences” they reinforce the brain’s “default” mode of identification. The lazy brain’s categorization system quickly goes to work. However, the brain is now asked to identify and recognize ethnicity, sex, age, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, and culture; and exclude and see no value in sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia (Stewart *et al.*, 2008). The human mind may have a great deal of difficulty handling such seemingly disparate commands.

Thus, a person may be easily encouraged to recognize differences. The trick, however, may lie in convincing the same person to see such differences as positive and to form bonds with “them.” Instead, “differences based” training sessions may ensure that *they* become or stay *them*. Put another way, “Recognized as part of my group; good, approach; not part of my group: bad, avoid” (Gazzaniga, 2008, p. 136). This could certainly be one reason why researchers see evidence of “irresistible stereotypes”, or deeply ingrained biases that cannot be appreciated away in a one-day workshop (Cullen, 2007).

Two well-known experiments supported people’s preferences for their own groups. First, Bigler *et al.* (1997) divided preschoolers into groups according to shirt colors. The researchers had hypothesized that the “saliency” of the shirt color would impact children’s group perceptions. As predicted, children tended to prefer members of their own group. Further, children were more apt to remember good things said about their own group and less about the other group.

A second study was run by Kurzban *et al.* (2001). These researchers were interested in the “encoding of race” (p. 15387). They wanted to know whether race identification was a “mandatory” component of human cognitive architecture. Instead, they hypothesized that human beings quickly identified race in order to “detect coalitions and alliances” (p. 15387).

Indeed, Kurzban *et al.* (2001) came to a surprising conclusion: “Less than 4 min of exposure to an alternate social world was enough to deflate the tendency to categorize by race” (p. 15387). Such is the power of “in-group” connections. Commonality forms coalitions, not differences.

In order to successfully form coalitions, diversity trainers would be best advised to:

- help participants perceive commonalities;
- blur the perception of traditional group categorization lines; and
- help participants form a “supra category” including all members of the organization.

Manipulating “perceptions”, therefore, is key to success in diversity training (Wildermuth and Gray, 2005).

Fortunately, positive perceptions can take place very quickly (Gazzaniga, 2008). Think of times when you have instantly liked someone. Think of times in which you have had a gut feeling of negativity toward someone. The human brain forms instantaneous connections and promotes the liking of other people who are similar to you (Gazzaniga, 2008). Thus, we propose that the most successful diversity approaches focus on the strengthening of connections rather than differences.

## “Conversity” training

Conversity means an intentional search for common ground through in-depth conversations (Wildermuth and Gray, 2005). Conversity training emphasizes common ground and introduces “alternative” group categories.

The latter is a particularly important piece of the training process. When participants of a training program are assigned to “traditional” categories (such as race or gender), the effect could be the reinforcement of group divisions. Instead, we recommend that participants be assigned alternative categories such as shirt color, team number, or team name.

These two components – “alternative categorization” and the intentional search for connections are reinforced throughout the program. “Alternative categorization” may cause the blurring of traditional group lines. The intentional search for connections, on the other hand, may forge unexpected alliances between group members. Gazzaniga (2008) stated:

People with a positive affect widen category groups by finding more similarities between objects, people, or social groups, enabling a socially distinct out-group to be placed into a broader mutual in-group – “Well, I know he is a Lakers Fan, but at least he loves to fish!” This results in less conflict (p. 240).

One “alternative category” we often used in our group processes involved personality. With the use of a Five Factor Model personality assessment (Howard and Howard, 2001), we created opportunities for individuals to find similarities based upon personality traits. For instance, participants were encouraged to bond with colleagues with the same level of extraversion, originality, or perfectionism.

A focus on connections does not preclude the trainer from discussing differences. The key, however, lies in the discussion of differences within a blanket of commonality. Once participants see one another as “members of their group” they are ready to discuss – and perhaps even appreciate – their group members’ idiosyncrasies.

## Conclusion

In the TV show *The West Wing*, Josh Lyman, a Democratic member of the President’s senior staff, spoke to a Republican Representative, Matt, on a bill dealing with gay marriage. Josh was frustrated with Matt’s willingness to support a party that did not promote gay rights. The dialogue continued:

Josh: How can you be a member of the Republican party?

Matt: I agree with 95 percent of the Republican Platform. I believe in local government. I am in favor of individual rights rather than group rights. I believe free markets lead to free people and that the country needs a strong national defense. My life doesn’t have to be about me being a homosexual! (Sorkin *et al.*, 2000).

Our lives are not *only* about being men or women, white or black, gay or straight. Instead, we share myriad interests and connections in a complex network of groups and interests. Successful diversity training simply capitalizes on such connections and reinforces paths in the network. Human nature takes care of the rest.

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