

The Conversivity® Revolution

Enriching teams, one connection at a time

Think of your best friend. This is a person you truly appreciate and enjoy. Then ask yourself – what made you become friends? What drew you to one another?

It is likely that the answer to these questions can be summarized in one word: *commonalities*. In fact, chances are that common interests, values, or affiliations are at the root of *most* of your current friendships.

The idea that *commonalities* matter has been abundantly supported by social psychologists. For instance, in the book *The Social Psychology of Prejudice* John Duckitt (1994) stated: “A consistently positive relationship has been observed between attitudinal similarity and interindividual attractions. Thus, people seek out and are attracted to those who are similar to themselves and tend to dislike those who are dissimilar” (pg. 77).

If commonalities are indeed key to relationships, a logical question is: Why do typical diversity presenters *emphasize* differences? Why do companies continue to fund programs that are completely opposite to social psychology research and perhaps even to common sense?

The Traditional Approach to Diversity

“Today, U.S. companies spend \$200 - \$300 million per year on diversity training.” (Jonolan 2008) The rationale for holding such programs ranges from compliance with government mandates and concern with lawsuits to a genuine interest in improving work relations. Once the training is completed, however, companies may be no more diverse than before. For instance, Kalev, Dobbins, & Kelly (2006) argued that “programs that target managerial stereotyping through education and feedback (diversity training and diversity evaluations) are not followed by increases in diversity” (pg. 590). Worse still, some employees may be even more hostile to diversity in the workplace *after* the training than before. Why does this happen?

Before answering this question, we need to examine traditional diversity training approaches. *In general*, such approaches seem to center on the following premises:

- Diversity training is required mainly for compliance (i.e. government regulation, response to potential or current lawsuits, etc.).
- The main reason workplace diverse relations are poor is lack of diversity awareness.
- In order to enhance diversity relations companies must help employees “value differences.”

The following section will address each of these premises.

1. Compliance Training

It may not surprise you to learn that mandatory diversity training designed to avoid liability in discrimination lawsuits does not work (Vedantam, 2008). People can read through the fine print and understand that the only purpose of the training is to comply with legal or government requirements. You know your diversity initiatives are “compliance-based” when:

- The top leadership does not participate in the debate prior to the implementation of the training
- The top leadership does not attend the training
- The top leadership comes to the training but stays for only a few minutes, alleging “very important meetings” elsewhere
- People whose diversity relationship skills are poor are still promoted and valued within the organization
- Minimum attention is paid to the training process and to the general logistics surrounding it (i.e. ultra short programs, ultra large groups, no facilitated sessions, etc.)

Here is the good news: *Compliance diversity* programs are likely to reach their *compliance* objectives (a company can provide court evidence that a program *was* run for x employees and lasted x hours). Expecting more, however, is unrealistic.

2. Diversity Awareness

Are people really not aware that differences exist? In today’s day and age that seems doubtful. Unless your employees have “lived in a bubble” most of their lives, diversity *awareness* is unlikely to be the main problem.

Even if lack of awareness *is* the problem, however, awareness alone does not automatically generate a) positive *attitudes* towards differences, or b) the right skills working through and with differences. Unfortunately, the average diversity training program hardly ever moves past the “awareness” stage.

3. Valuing Differences

Armed with good intentions, typical trainers move from “awareness” discussions to the importance of “valuing differences.” Participants are told that differences are important for team effectiveness and are asked to “celebrate diversity.” In theory, the idea sounds good – differences are, indeed, important to many endeavors. There are various problems, however, with the “valuing differences” approach to diversity:

- There are myriad types of differences – some are good, some are innocuous, and some are downright unproductive. For instance, one would hardly want a “diversity of honesty” or a “diversity of engagement.” Before we claim that differences are good, we need to specify what differences we are talking about.
- The same difference could be valuable in one situation and detrimental in another. For instance, personality diversity may be very useful when a team is solving a complex problem that requires diversity of input (ideas or perspective) or when a project team must assign differentiated roles to team members. Personality diversity may, however, be unproductive when teams have similar tasks and must accomplish them quickly.
- People are attracted to similarities. In fact, when prejudiced individuals are encouraged to “value differences” they may become more prejudiced than they were before (Bennett, 1993).

The last item may explain why many diversity training initiatives really hit a “brick wall.” Summarizing some key ideas from social psychology may better help address and understand this phenomenon.

Lessons from Social Psychology

Social psychology research (Kidder & Stewart, 1975) suggests that “any kind of intergroup dissimilarity could generate dislike.” People like similarities – not differences. When one takes a step back and analyzes friendships and relationships (remember the questions at the beginning of this article?), one realizes that connections are actually the glue that brings people together.

If we are to seek to revamp this diversity initiative, the following social psychology topics are key: a) Social Identity Theory, and b) categorization.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) analyzes group identification and the strength of intergroup ties. Researchers defined SIT as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). Intergroup ties are powerful. People are social animals and enjoy the sense of belonging that the group provides. As a result, people tend to discriminate against those who do *not* belong to the group.

Categorization is the act of forming group categories (Brown, 1995). In order to make better sense of the world, people tend to “create boxes” and use these boxes as a filter to make sense of reality. In fact, Brown explained that categorization is an inescapable part of living. The world is simply too complex and categories are necessary if individuals are to find a place he/she can fit in.

Categorization is connected to diversity relations in at least two ways:

- People find categories instinctively – and classify colleagues accordingly. This could lead to stereotyping and erroneous assumptions.
- Categorization could be *strengthened* by diversity training.

Researchers found that categorization happens fast, even when the categories are “minimal” or “trivial” (Tajfel et al. 1971). For instance participants of groups divided according to an arbitrary color (the blue vs. the yellow group) are fast to bond around their group identity.

Categorization can be the diversity trainer’s worst enemy – or best friend. If differences are emphasized during training, the natural tendencies towards “boxing” may lead individuals to discriminate more against other groups after the training than before. On the other hand, categorization can be helpful. As long as individuals see themselves as members of the same category, categorization will work to strengthen team relations.

Triggering Discrimination

It would be easy to assume that because of SIT and categorization, differences between individuals will always cause conflict. That is not, however, necessarily the case. First, individuals are all members of myriad groups or categories, depending on ethnic background, nationality, profession, gender, religious affiliation, etc. The situation determines which of these categories are most salient. It is possible, moreover, to strengthen the perception of a “supracategory” encompassing all others. For instance, two individuals could come from different ethnic backgrounds and nationalities but still see themselves as members of the same project team.

Secondly, the strong bonds we feel with one of our groups do not necessarily force us to discriminate against other groups. There are “triggers” that may make group members discriminate against non members (Verkyten, 2003). Examples of these triggers include the following:

- *Visibility*: The larger the perceived quantity of differences between groups, and the more visible they are, the stronger the bias against non-group members (Brown, 1995). Also, some differences seem to “matter” most – for instance, in the U.S. society racial differences seem to be particularly salient.
- *Competition*: Any competitive situation can strengthen bias between groups (Duckitt, 1994).
- *Social rules*: The group determines what does and what doesn’t constitute socially acceptable behavior. For instance, when the culture accepts open prejudice, discrimination is much more overt and unapologetic (Verkyten, 2003).
- *Permeability*: When the different groups perceive themselves to share the same social status and when it is easy to move from one group to another (for instance, a middle manager can easily see herself as a future higher level manager) discrimination is likely to be lessened.

Logically, therefore, diversity initiatives should:

- Increase the perception of a “supracategory” that everyone in the group shares
- De-emphasize traditional differences and emphasize connections
- Reduce intergroup competition
- Enforce social rules that are most conducive to respectful relations

- Connect traditionally separated groups (i.e. managers and non managers, union and non union members, members of different departments, nationalities, and ethnicities)
- Optimize recruitment and promotion processes that will bring traditionally underrepresented groups to the top of the organization – and thus enhance the perceived social status of members of the various ethnic groups.

Of course, training alone will not be sufficient to accomplish all this. For instance, recruitment and promotion processes are not achieved merely through leadership development processes. Likewise, whatever social rules are introduced via a training program must be strongly promoted and enforced by organizational leaders.

Training can, however, accomplish *exactly the opposite* and *do harm*. Typical “celebrating differences” activities can strengthen differences and reduce connections. This may be why, in many cases, conventional diversity training fails to create an atmosphere of acceptance and, instead, actually strengthens prejudice.

Towards Conversivity®

Fortunately, there is a solution to this dilemma. Chances are your employees will be happy to embrace differences – but only *after* they find connections and form a strong bond. If there is competition, it must be directed *outside* the organization. If differences are to be emphasized, they should be emphasized in the outside world.

Observe, for instance, what happened after September 11. The shock of the NY Towers being attacked drew the majority of Americans – and many foreign citizens – together. A bond was formed as people spoke of that severe and traumatic event.

Another example can be found in the military. Soldiers often give testimony to a deeply felt connection with their comrades. Some will volunteer for another tour of duty in order to stay connected to those within the company, even to the point of death. Survival needs lead soldiers to channel their perceptions of difference to the outside world.

These examples illustrate the power of connections in human relations. Paradoxically, research shows the path to diversity is not the valuing of differences but the discovery of **connections**. We call this approach Conversivity®.

By strengthening connections, Conversivity® can release the power of “all for one and one for all.” Now the richness of perspectives and ideas are seen as an interesting variety and not a barrier. In other words: Conversivity® is the foundation upon which diversity can enrich organizations.

Some of the Conversivity® best practices:

- *Incorporate non-traditional differences:* Focus any discussions on differences around less traditional diversity topics such as personality, learning styles, and multiple intelligences. At the beginning of the process, avoid strengthening the perception of salient differences such as race and gender. If there are severe issues around those more traditional topics, address them only *after* the team has forged strong bonds.
- *Strengthen team building:* Sometimes the best diversity initiative is a good old-fashioned team building program, complete with interesting activities and an off-site experience.
- *Foster connections:* Encourage employees to find commonalities at every possible opportunity. Reward networking programs that cross traditional boundaries.
- *Improve intergroup flow:* Diversity relations benefit greatly from equal opportunity and equal status connections between ranks. Make sure the various organizational levels are permeable, making advancement easy for people from all backgrounds.
- *Channel competition to the outside world:* At our consulting practice, we are now bringing together members of *different* organizations in the same diversity training workshop. During the workshop we encourage competition *between* the organizations. This technique makes competition work to strengthen intrateam bonds within each organizational unit.

Companies always want the biggest “bang for the buck.” The typical diversity training might deliver a bang – but become an ineffective and costly endeavor in the long run. If you are looking for a logical, human nature friendly approach to releasing powerful diverse ideas, find connections – not differences.

Mel Wildermuth, M.B.A., and Cris Wildermuth, M.Ed., are the Executive Partners of The Effectiveness Group, a consulting firm specialized in workplace relations and leadership development. Mel and Cris can be reached at mel@theeffectivenessgroup.com and cris@theeffectivenessgroup.com.

Bibliographic References

Bennett, M. J. (1993). Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. In Education for the Intercultural Experience, R. M. Paige, Ed. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Brown, R. (1995). Prejudice: It's Social Psychology. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Duckitt, J. (1994). The social psychology of prejudice. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Kalev, Dobbins, & Keley. (2006). *Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies*. American Sociological Review, Vol. 71 (August: 589-617)

Kidder, L., & Stewart, V. (1975). *The psychology of intergroup relations: Conflict and consciousness*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Tajfel, H., Flament, C. Billig, M., & Bundy, R. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1, 149 – 177.

Tajfell, H. (1972). Social categorization. English manuscript of “La categorization sociale.” In *Introduction a la Psychologie Sociale*, ed. S. Moscovici, 1:272-302. Paris: Larousse.

Vendantam, S., (January 20, 2008). *Most Diversity Training Ineffective, Study Finds*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/19/AR2008011901899_pf.html

Verkuyten, M. (2003). Ethnic In-group Bias Among Minority & Majority Early Adolescents: The Perception of Negative Peer Behavior. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 21 (4), 543-564.

Jonolan (January 21, 2008). *Diversity Training Fails/Reflections From a Murky Pond*. <http://blog.jolan.net/society/diversity-training-31-years-of-failure/>