ENGAGING DIVERSITY:
DISORIENTING DILEMMAS THAT TRANSFORM RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract
The diverse workforce offers opportunities for us to challenge our everyday assumptions and reflexive responses to our social worlds. New skills and tools for making sense of our experiences are critically important. The REAL Model helps organizations leverage differences in their workforce and the marketplace.

Overview
Our paper introduces the REAL Model that helps organizations manage and leverage differences in their workforce and the marketplace. The process of reflection is a critical component to taking the perspective of another and, in so doing, see one’s own meaning making processes in a new way [Cranton, Marsick, Mezirow, 1993, 2001]. Critical reflection and engaging with those whose social world, values, or historical narratives are significantly different from our own expands our ways of construing meaning and making sense in relationships [Wasserman, 2004]. Transformational learning practices thus provide organizations with new and constructive ways of addressing challenges and issues previously found to be at best inhibiting and at their worst, intractable.

Disorienting Dilemmas and Diversity
Life in organizations is so complex that we encounter disorienting dilemmas or moments of mis-meeting in our social encounters on nearly a daily basis. Stories of self and other are often so deeply embedded that for significant shifts to occur in the dynamics of relationships, transformative learning must occur in relationships and the culture of organizations, rather than merely for individuals. At the point that we are confused or thrown into uncertain situations, we have a choice – do we ignore the difference and move away from the interaction or do we engage in critical reflection. If we avoid moments of mis-meeting, dissonance or disorienting dilemmas, we miss the potential opportunity to learn more about ourselves, the other, and new ways of relating. Wasserman (2004) suggests that critical reflection on these moments, with others with whom we experience dissonance opens the possibilities of creating new forms of relating that include our differences more fully.

The following example from our consulting practice demonstrates the confusing situation people often find themselves facing. When intentions do not align with impact or outcomes, people wonder what went wrong and feel confused, ineffective and often resentful.
- Maya is a senior manager who conveys a lot of optimism. She is an immigrant who has been afforded many opportunities. While eager to understand others, she has been having a hard time understanding the difficulties others have when it has felt so easy for her.
- Teresa is a supervisor in the same organization. She has great pride in having risen through the ranks of the organization having started in an entry-level position. She was born in Puerto Rico and feels that her successful movement into a professional role positions her as a role model for other Latinas in the organization. She takes every opportunity to tell her story in the hopes that it will inspire others to invest in their own development.
Maya serves as a mentor to Teresa and offers her feedback intended to advance her career. She suggests that Teresa not tell people of her humble background as it only invites negative judgments and distracts from her positive attributes.

- Teresa feels insulted. Maya feels misunderstood and underappreciated for her efforts.

Teresa and Maya would benefit from a shared language for reflecting on their encounter. The opportunity for reflection would support Teresa and Maya in moving from being identified with the conflict or being the conflict to looking at the conflict. This would be characterized by a move from the first to the third person perspective.

Using reflective tools derived from the CMM model (Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce 1994, 2006), we can map out the different rules, norms and influences – messages if you will - that Teresa and Maya bring to their encounter. The following “daisy” diagram outlines some of these:

Figure 1: Adaptation of the Daisy Model from B. Pearce, Communication and the Human Condition, 1989

In the encounter between Teresa and Maya, Teresa learned that Maya places a high value on accommodating to the expectations of others and promoting oneself in the most positive light possible. Maya’s taken-for-granted frame of reference is grounded in her Asian cultural norms which value conformity, fitting in, being part of the group and deference to the dominant culture. Teresa shapes her story based on her Latino cultural value of remembering where you came from and honoring your roots [Gallegos 1987; Cox 1994; Ferdman and Gallegos 2001]. This dynamic of group identity norms playing out in interpersonal dynamics is a frequent source of disorienting dilemmas at the workplace. Senior leaders who recognize the value of coordinating communication are interested in ways to develop employees who encounter differences with curiosity and empathy rather than avoidance or defensiveness [Bennett & Bennett, 2005]

Disorienting dilemmas occur within organizations at the individual, interpersonal and systemic levels. Individuals such as Maya face dilemmas related to contradictions between the people they think they are and how others perceive them.

Model for REAL Dialogue and Engagement

The REAL Model offers a way to create traction and insure meaning contact in relationships by fostering new ways of relating. This model incorporates the work of Pearce, (2004), Kegan and Lahey (2000), Senge and Schwarmer (2005) and Wasserman (2004). Each of these scholars provides a perspective for unpacking assumptions or mental models for making meaning, and
looking at alternative possibilities. Our years of practice have been enriched by the principles of the work cited, and helps to inform the kind of structures and processes that would support Maya and Teresa to shift from judgments to curiosity, from assumptions to inquiry and from fixed stories of the other to unfolding and emergent shared narratives. Noticing and engaging around moments of mis-meeting or disorientation are opportunities for destabilizing entrenched habits and exploring new, more creative paths of engaging.

**REFLECTING on Current Relationships, Assumptions and Situations**

We are continuously constructing our social worlds in the process of communication. Communication consists of an action that makes rather than reports meanings. Every communication act is consequential. Since we influence and affect our social worlds in what we say or do or how we do or don’t respond, we enact ethical implications and consequences with every choice we make. Engaging with others whose life experiences have been significantly different from one’s own often creates a sense of confusion or dissonance as the norms that one might take for granted may be interpreted differently by a person from a different ethnic, cultural, racial, gender, class, or geographic background. Those whose way of making sense becomes the norm of the whole organization are considered the “dominant culture”. Typically, members of the dominant culture see their way of thinking as “normal” and may not even notice it. Those who have a different perspective based on their history and cultural norms are more likely to notice and be able to describe the norms of the dominant culture. Members of the dominant culture may experience a sense of dissonance when they hear the voices of those who have felt marginalized under conditions they have deemed “normal”. The challenge of building organizational competence in intercultural encounters is different for those in subordinate and dominant groups. Each is experiencing the world differently based on what barriers or support they encounter. It takes work to build cultural empathy that allows each group to recognize the validity of the other group’s perspective and become willing to learn about the experiences radically different from their own. Milton Bennett has written extensively about the need to “overcome the golden rule” by acknowledging that treating others as we want to be treated is a flawed strategy for engaging differences.

**EXPANDING Awareness Across Differences**

Having explored current relationships, assumptions and situations, the next phase in our work with clients is focused on expanding awareness and deepening understanding of how the current situation is lived in the organization. Within every organization, there co-exist multiple narratives of the organization, past, present and future as well as multiple ways of contributing to the mission and contributing to its success. Leaders play a key role in creating the conditions for people to have deep and rich conversations across differences. These conditions include exploring what creates safety and trust, and suspending knowing and certainty.

When people come to work they bring the stories of their lives with them. According to Bruner (1990), people organize their experiences and knowing in the form of narrative. Narratives that potentially foster connections and affiliations among people may also create walls of misunderstanding and disruptions to relating. When my narrative conflicts with yours, we find ourselves in a relational disorienting dilemma.

A poignant example of this dynamic occurred in a large financial services firm where we were working with the senior leadership team. Among the six senior vice-presidents, Andre was the only African American man. He interacted well with his white male colleagues in business
settings and became an avid golfer recognizing the important conversations that took place during these activities. In one particularly candid team building session, Andre disclosed the day-to-day challenges he faced as a Black man in a predominantly white organization, discussing his marginalization in relation to other African Americans at lower levels as well as the difficulty he encountered fitting in with his peers at the senior level. He likened his experience as having to “put on a suit of armor” every morning to face the daily onslaught of incidents of racism and exclusion. His colleagues on the team were shocked by his disclosure. They thought Andre fit in effortlessly and felt totally accepted. It was a challenge for them to understand the gap between his story and theirs. The ability of the team to hold the contradictions and learn from them helped them fully embrace Andre more fully as their esteemed co-worker.

Daily routine communication, such as reporting on each other’s tasks, actions and operations, usually takes place in the form of storytelling (Boje 1991; 1995). Different representations of the different groups in an organization, be they cultural, functional or other, are created in everyday communication. Some of these may seem harmless, but in effect are offending and harassing and debilitating to the organizational atmosphere (Olsson 2002). Raising awareness of such harmful representations is often one of the central focuses in diverse organizations.

For example, a large hospital located in an ethnically diverse community is struggling to deal with the many languages spoken by employees and patients. Initial attempts to manage this linguistic diversity lead to the establishment of a harsh and punitive “English Only Policy” Problems arose for the nursing staff when patients and medical staff addressed them in other languages. Through dialogue and reflection, they were able to arrive at a more realistic and appreciative stance on multi-lingual communication that was respectful of employee’s cultures, patient care and business need. They are on their way to being an employer of choice for nurses in their region at a time when nursing shortages are reaching critical levels.

We often rely on story telling across difference to create breakthrough experiences for co-workers. Many people carry stereotypes about others that are more or less fixed depending on the extent of real life exposure one has to other groups. These stereotypes are fostered in narratives that are influenced by one’s own ethnicity, gender, class and generational cohort.

**AGILITY in Behavior and Ways of Engaging**

In a recent education session, a participant exclaimed sincerely his intention to “never say anything that would offend a person of difference ever again”. While his sincerity was admirable, this is difficult if not impossible to achieve. None of us can expect to fully understand all interactions. The best we can hope for is to humbly position ourselves as learners, as being curious, being willing to listen and reflect on our own behavior and taken for granted frames of mind and habits of engaging, to explore with others, what other possibilities exist.

In a diverse environment, it is easy to assume that we are all having the same experience. The data we collect in conducting organizational assessments clearly indicates that people are in the same building, (literally or virtually) living very different narratives. People are making sense of their lives based on both individual and collective social identity group experiences. Part of the difficulty of making dominant rules inclusive for all is the fact that not all rules are visible and explicit. Everyday practices such as giving and receiving feedback, offering advice or mentoring, paying compliments and building trust become fraught with the potential for misunderstanding. Increasingly these diverse worlds are encountering each other side by side – presenting opportunity for people to gain, benefit and learn from their encounters. To transform rules from dilemmas into organizational learning we need to stay engaged with each other long enough to
challenge our assumptions and form new ways and patterns of relating (Wasserman, 2004).

Telling a story about, as distinct from describing, what life is like in the organization from different perspectives helps to stimulate people’s empathetic orientation, which provides a basis for connecting to the experiences and world-views of other people. Similarly, organizational culture is created and perpetuated by communication processes. The culture defines “What kind of an organization are we?” and “What kind of people are the members of our organization?” through narratives and communication processes [Barrett and Cooperrider 1990; Lamsa and Sintonen 2006]. As it relates to diversity, an inclusive culture is one in which multiple realities are acknowledged and openly explored. In establishing norms in teams and departments, leaders may need to attend to the conflicting narratives being told by various groups and support a more participatory narrative that honors the differences and yet establishes clear boundaries and expectations. While minimizing differences and focusing only on similarities is easier in the short term, there are also long term costs associated with taking the path of least resistance. Organizational learning can only occur when we are willing to stay in contact and explore the values of the other in a climate of mutual respect and reflection.

LEARNING from Shared Stories that Transform Individuals and Organizations

There are certain episodes or events that, unfortunately, have occurred in many different organizations with which we have worked. We find that when we use these examples in a teaching venue, we see many nods that indicate, “Oh, I know that one!” One story is of an African American employee who discovers that she or he has been depicted in e-mail by a racial epithet. In this scenario, the person who sent the e-mail claims not to have meant anything racial. Rather, the communication was an expression of frustration with the individual. In this case, the Serpentine model along with the Daisy model are two tools we might use to help us stand back and reflect on what we are making and how:

Challenges to Taken for Granted Assumptions Enhance the Workplace

We have seen many situations where issues faced by diverse individuals and groups become opportunities for organizational learning and success. Some examples from our work include:

- **Work schedules.** At first, flexible schedules were considered special dispensation for working mothers who needed to take care of children. Over the past 20 years, we have seen the benefits extend to life style, co-parenting, eldercare, as well as workload issues.

- **Who does what work** often brought to light “taken for granted” habits of mind or assumptions that did not necessarily reproduce the most efficient, safe or smart ways of working. For example, women firefighters helped their male counterparts discover alternatives to backbreaking heavy lifting.

- **Different abilities** shifted our attention to how the workplace could accommodate different needs and in the process, improve team performance. In one instance one of the authors was working with a leadership team of a major university. One of the members of the team was hearing impaired and read lips. She requested that at our meetings, we paused between speakers to enable her to notice where she needed to shift her eyes. The effect of her request was to slow down the conversation so each person listened to whoever was speaking and people did not talk over each other.

- **Products are moving toward customization** as technology enables companies to more closely address diverse markets.
These are only a few areas in which having skills and processes for addressing differences opened the possibilities for doing work as usual in a different way, expanding our repertoire while better meeting the needs of the customer.

**Summary**

Leveraging the value of diversity requires fostering a culture of inclusion to develop the skills and competencies that cannot be easily transmitted in a short training session. Advancing an inclusive culture requires new skills that call for shifting habits of mind and habits of relating. In this chapter we stressed the importance of capturing the opportunity for disorienting dilemmas as portals for transformative learning in action. While letting things “roll off one’s back” is a noble quality, too often each instance of letting it go becomes a pattern that creates divisions among people. If we wait too long, those divisions become too deep to traverse. Creating the norm in organizations that we address moments in which we misconnect without blame or criticism but rather as opportunities for relational learning, can be transformative for individuals, teams and organizations as a whole.

**REFERENCES**


Kegan, R. and L. Lahey (2000). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation.*


