

Diversity Development In Today's Organizations

Introduction

The Diversity "Industry"

When working with groups of people who are interested in understanding more about issues of social diversity, we sometimes ask, "What is the largest demographic group in the United States?" We then reject their many (reasonable) responses. As curiosity mounts, we announce, with dramatic flourish, "The largest demographic group in the United States is that of Diversity Trainers!"

The comment usually brings a smile, but with that, comes the recognition of a core ironic truth: As many know, this diversity topic has spawned an industry of no small proportion. For many years there have been very large numbers of professionals describing themselves as "diversity consultants." As a result, there have developed certain "traditions", or "standard operating procedures" that guide organizational change work in this arena. It is important that we describe the implications of these traditions so that we may contrast them with the approach our firm takes to these efforts.

A (Very) Brief History

The late nineteen forties and early fifties were a time of very active development in the field of group dynamics. As this body of knowledge and skill was generated at an accelerating rate, methods were created to educate people about these ideas, and the skills of group development associated with them. Many of those techniques found their way into the (then) new profession of organizational change.

The nineteen sixties were a time of profound change in our society. The strategies and tactics that guided these social change efforts were based upon techniques and principles of community development, and social and political activism. These confrontational approaches were extremely effective in mobilizing energy, and increasing the social awareness that stimulated change.

Today, as we look at the profession of organizational change (and its associated disciplines) we find an interesting, and most important dichotomy:

Efforts of organizational change and enhancement are clearly based upon the group dynamics concepts and techniques developed in the forties and fifties, *except when they touch upon one significant topic or goal: Diversity*. When organizations wish to change with regard to issues of social diversity, they tend to reach out to experts whose approaches are firmly rooted in the political and social change techniques developed in the sixties.

The methods based in these community development and political activism approaches are so widely used, that we will call them the “Traditional Model.” Some of the contrasts between those approaches and our Support Model appear below:

The characteristics of the “Traditional Model” are in the left column and those of our “Support Model” are on the right.

Traditional Model

The underlying principles are those used to describe the phenomena of social oppression. It is a core assumption that along any significant dimension of difference, there are those who are oppressed, and those who are the oppressors. The model is that of struggle between these two groups. Were we to consider issues of gender, we would be told by adherents of this model that men, motivated by base instincts, tend to oppress women. Analogously, were we to consider issues of race and heritage, we would be told that people of European background, that is, white people, tend, almost without exception, to oppress, demean, diminish, and hold as inferior, those of other races.

This model's foundation metaphor and associated language and concepts are those of *combat and opposition*. The focus is on the desire to "fight" the negative oppressive tendencies in individuals and in organizations.

It is assumed that membership in particular social groups, whether by race, gender, or other aspects of identity, is the primary determinant of behavior and attitude

The tone of diversity educational activities is that of evaluation, scrutiny, and, as a result, concern. Most people find the activities to be unpleasant and a source of anxiety.

Sole Support Model

Our approach is based upon our sincere belief that the vast majority of organizational employees are good people who are well motivated. These people typically want to have good, pleasant, and productive relationships with the others with whom they work, including that they perceive to be different from themselves. These people want to make a significant organizational contribution, and they understand that ultimately, their organizations will succeed only to the degree that they find ways to increase the likelihood of recruiting and retaining the most talented people that can be found, whatever their cultural identity.

Our model's foundation metaphor and associated language is that of *healthy* group development. Participants are encouraged to practice with the goal of improving communication, particularly across dimensions of difference.

We assume that the primary determinants of behavior and attitude are experience, and level of skill development. Within every group there are likely to be people lacking in diversity-related skill and others who are more highly skilled.

The tone of diversity activities is that of exploration, dialog, and problem solving. Most people find the activities to be pleasant, and even fun.

Because of the pervasive tone of evaluation and scrutiny, people quickly learn to “say the right thing” in the public setting of diversity sessions. These behaviors are not internalized and are not displayed when people feel that they are not under scrutiny.

Resistance to change is inevitable, but goes “underground” where it has destructive consequences.

Data are collected to find problems and deficits. The data collection process stimulates a sense of dissatisfaction. Those from whom data are collected usually feel that they are being scrutinized.

Materials such as handouts, or videos, are chosen to teach those diversity behaviors that are deemed to be “appropriate.”

Organizational employees become suspicious of others. Their ability to influence the organization in these matters derives from being seen as worthy by the diversity consultants. They are “chosen” for their adherence to the model, and to the attitudes it presents.

Leadership resides within the consultant team, and those selected as their internal representatives. Expertise in the diversity arena is closely held. Diversity involvement becomes something of an exclusive “club.”

As we nourish a climate of safety and exploration, people feel free to offer their reactions authentically. They can then see how their behaviors affect others. With this opportunity, they can modify their behavior in the direction of greater group benefit.

The inevitable resistance to change stays at the “surface” where it becomes a source for productive exploration of the issues.

Data are collected to inform the refinement of our consultative approach. The focus is on values, success, goals, and avenues of opportunity. Those from whom data are collected feel that they are partners in the creation of a customized intervention.

Handouts, videos, and other materials are chosen to stimulate dialog. They are used to catalyze a deeper exploration of diversity issues so that, together, participants can develop behaviors that they believe to be most beneficial.

Organizational employees become involved in the diversity effort because they find such involvement to be attractive. Their ability to influence the organization in these matters derives from their contagious energy and enthusiasm about the issues of diversity.

Leadership resides with organizational managers, and other employees. Diversity skill is seen as central to organizational success. The expectation is that all employees will be involved in diversity efforts.

The primary conflicts that stimulate curiosity are those that may exist between groups. The focus on inter-group division often exacerbates these conflicts.

Using any of a variety of tools and techniques these approaches ultimately create a division in the social system that is the organization: Frequently, the organization separates into “two camps”. Over time, on the one side we see those who view their own group as enlightened, and even morally superior. On the other, we see those who feel that they are under constant scrutiny as they are held to (what they usually believe to be) artificial, and arbitrary, standards of behavior.

Differences of opinion and perspective are discouraged. While explicitly claiming diversity to be of great value, it is implicitly discouraged. True diversity is ultimately seen as a problem, or impediment to progress. Conflict is seen as something to be feared and avoided.

The knowledge developed is specific to issues of diversity. Participants see little connection to other issues in their lives.

We can describe the traditional model as a form of *help*. This is, of course, a common term, but is used here in a specific psychological sense that will be amplified below. It is based principally upon the goal of illuminating individual and organizational deficiencies so that these (with the guidance of consultants) can be ameliorated.

Though conflicts between groups are not ignored, equal emphasis is placed upon those conflicts within groups, and individuals, as they attempt to work more effectively with people different from themselves.

Using the tools and techniques of group dynamics, we work to heal divisions between groups within the organization. People tend to more fully appreciate their commonality of purpose with regard to organizational success. With regard to diversity-related skills, people come to appreciate that we all have strengths, and also areas worthy of further development.

Differences of opinion and perspective are encouraged. The exploration of difference becomes a source of curiosity and satisfaction. Conflict is seen as inevitable, but potentially productive. Diversity becomes not a problem to be solved, but rather, a resource to be invested.

The skills developed have very wide application. Participants value these skills in all aspects of their work lives, and also in other settings.

The work of our firm is a form of *support*. This familiar term is used here in a technical sense that will be amplified below. We seek out individual and organizational diversity resources, strengths and successes. Those become the foundation for durable, and beneficial diversity efforts.

Results Over Time

Though we hesitate to evaluate these approaches from the perspective of moral, or ethical worth, we are eager to express our views of the position of these approaches on the dimensions of organizational change benefit and practicality.

In our opinion, the traditional “combat” and “opposition” methods simply do not succeed. These approaches have a debilitating effect at every level of organizational life because they encourage the vast majority of employees feel guilty both about their history, and their current behavior. People in organizations held in the grip of the *combat model* tend to hide their views in the desire to avoid punishment for their perceived “transgressions.” Because true diversity development requires that people explore their differences in a climate of safety, the result of the traditional combat approach is the opposite of its stated purpose: In such a climate, any momentum for authentic diversity development grinds to a halt.

While those who advocate the Traditional Model tend, over time, to divide their client community, our approach tends to bring people together. Absent the tone of moral judgment, people feel free to be expressive of their own values and experiences, and curious about the values and experiences of others.

Concepts of Organizational Change

The Sole & Associates approach to diversity education is built upon a set of concepts developed over the last twenty-five years. In order to clearly convey the motivation for our approach to issues of organizational diversity, we need to describe the concepts that guide our thought.

Help and Support

Of the concepts that guide our firm's work with organizations that wish to change, none seem to have the centrality of these easily explained concepts. This is particularly true when we work on issues of diversity.

There are two different relationships that define the social-psychological context in which people may provide assistance to others. One of these is called *help*. It simply means that people do something so that others need not do it. As an example, let us suppose that one is walking through a parking garage and notices a colleague struggling along under the weight of several heavy boxes. It is likely that any of us would offer to assist by carrying one (or more) of the boxes, thus lightening the load borne by our colleague. We choose to do the work of lifting those boxes so that the other person is relieved of the need to do so. Assistance of this form, or social-psychological structure, is called *help*.

Support is a different way to provide assistance. Support is any behavior that contributes to the *capacity* of others.

Of course, the concepts that are the foundation of the distinction between help and support are not new. They are so old, in fact, that they have found their way into the world of proverbs: We have all probably heard that "If you give someone a fish, they eat for a day... If you teach someone to fish, they eat for a lifetime." Using the

definitions offered above, “*giving* someone a fish” is an act of *help*, while “*teaching* someone to fish” is an act of *support*.

There are significant implications to these seemingly simple relationships of help and support. For example, over the course of time, those who receive help are likely to become dependent on those who provide it. In certain situations, over the course of time, when help is provided, the distinctions between the recipients and the providers are emphasized. The helpers and their capacities can become somehow “larger” in comparison to those of the people who are the recipients of the help. It is particularly important that organizational change professionals understand the implications of this notion: In our firm, we have chosen to avoid the temptation to work in ways that have our organizational clients saying to us any variant of “We never could have done it without you...” We tend not to offer *help*. Instead, it is our desire to offer *support*.

Support, by its very definition (that is, those behaviors that contribute to the *increase in capacity of the recipient*) clearly does not foster dependency. The recipients of support increase in strength and ability, and, over time, develop a peer like relation of interdependence with those who provide the support. Support leads to a very powerful, and valuable, form of partnership.

Supporters and helpers have entirely different foci for their efforts. They notice different things about organizational life, whether in their informal observations and experiences, or in their more formal efforts of data collection. Once they understand the motivations for an organizational change effort, supporters and helpers try to change different things. Because helpers want to do things to “lighten the load” for those they wish to help, they focus primarily on the *needs* of the recipients of their efforts. In organizational terms, helpers focus on the deficits, problems, or weaknesses of organizational culture, and then try, by any of a wide variety of means, to correct them. Those who wish to provide support do not work in that way. Because they wish to enhance capacity, supporters focus on the *strengths and abilities* of those they wish to assist. Supporters look for the things that are going

well. In organizational terms, supporters look for the successes, they are drawn to the strengths, they are attracted to the positive aspects of organizational life, and once having found them, work toward their amplification or enhancement.

It is important to remember that help is the appropriate form of assistance in many interpersonal and organizational situations. Let us consider once again the example of assisting the colleague who labors under the weight of those heavy boxes. Suppose, in the misplaced desire to provide support (rather than help) the person offering to assist merely said “Remember, always lift with your legs!” Clearly, whatever the motivation, the desire to assist would have failed.

As our firm provides assistance to organizations, it is not that we simply wish to avoid providing help. Rather, it is our desire to best match the modality of assistance we might provide to the organizational context, as we understand it.

A Systemic Approach

Organizations are social *systems*. Though some of the implications of this notion are complex, at its core, this simply means that it is best if we think of organizations as interconnected parts. We must remember that if one part of an organization changes, ultimately, all parts are affected by the change. If one part of an organization is supported in any of its aspects, its strength or capacity increases, and ultimately, all parts of the organization are affected in positive ways.

Tension and Motivation

Tension is a social-psychological term for motivational energy. It can be understood as analogous to the “electricity” that makes things move and change. It is also the “charge” that stimulates memory, curiosity, focus, and concern with particular matters. Quite obviously, if the tension in any system is too low, the system will stagnate. Perhaps

equally obvious is the notion that if the tension in a system is too high things will grind to a halt as quickly. This is because people cannot function well if they become “over-loaded” with motivational energy. When tension becomes too high, people in any organizational system become strained to a point of diminished capacity. For every social system, there is a zone of optimal tension.

There is an important aspect of the understanding of the manifestations of tension that is somewhat less than obvious. Indeed, when the tension is too low, people appear to be lacking in interest. They display a low energy about a given matter. They show a lack of curiosity, and an overall lack of engagement with the issue at hand.

Perhaps surprisingly, people whose tension level is too high sometimes display precisely the same characteristics!

In any organizational change effort, the skillful management of tension is central. It is desirable to keep the tension level “in the optimal zone” but there are two distinct approaches to achieving that easily described goal:

Those who wish to provide *help* try to manage tension by altering the characteristics of those events that stimulate tension and by moderating the degree to which these events have influence. Helpers try to insulate people from the tension generated by the forces of change. The reflex of helpers is to protect, and to “spoon-feed.” They tend to act as if the tension generated by the need for change is somehow *explosive*.

For those who wish to provide *support*, the beneficial management of tension relies on the ability to contribute to an increase in the *capacity* of the organization’s members to respond to the tension with comfort and productivity.

Modeling

In many of the programs we conduct, the handouts we provide to participants are printed on pastel colored paper. Often, when working with large groups of people who are interested in issues of organizational change it is possible to demonstrate a profoundly important aspect of change theory with one very simple act:

The presenter waits until the particular sheet with which the participants are working happens to be of a light yellow or orange color, and then holds his or her own copy in hand. Then, just as participants are starting to read their sheets, the presenter offers the comment that “perhaps you have noticed that these have a slight citrus aroma.” And (timing is everything in this) draws the page to their nose as if to enjoy its fragrance.

At that moment, with a loud flutter, sometimes hundreds of pages move “noseward.”

As you may be aware, the effect would be dramatically diminished if the presenter were to merely *describe* the aroma. No, the description alone is not very likely to produce any significant motivating tension at all. It is the *behavior* that produces the tension. It is the *behavior* that motivates. Those in the group smell the sheets of paper that they hold, because they see, and, in a sense, *feel* the presenter doing the same.

This important process is called modeling, and it is one of the most powerful ways to influence the behaviors and social climate of any organization....

The Goals of Diversity Interventions

Those professionals who adhere to the Traditional Model in the formulation of their diversity efforts usually make a moral, or ethical case in describing their overall goals.

It is our belief that the moral, or ethical arguments are extremely strong, but ironically, in today's organizational climate making such arguments is completely unnecessary.

In today's increasingly competitive environment, it is simply not possible for organizations to succeed unless they make the fullest advantage of their available talent.

Those organizations that will succeed in the future are those who can find ways to recruit, retain, and support talented people of many backgrounds. In addition, it is important to understand that as used here "retention" means much more than merely keeping representatives of a diverse population on the payroll. It means building a social context in which *all people* are motivated and supported so that they can make their greatest possible organizational contribution.

Quality diversity interventions assist clients as they build the context for such diversity success. Such change in the social system becomes the foundation for lasting organizational benefit.

Methodological Considerations

Having explored some of the underlying concepts, let us now return to issues of methodology, and the approach our firm takes to issues of organizational diversity.

Of course, “diversity” is merely another word for “difference.” But which differences should be explored in a quality organizational diversity effort? In many of the settings in which our firm works, we find the desire expressed by the organization’s management, that their diversity efforts include *all differences* between people. They often mention to us such (ambiguous) characteristics as “personal style” in this regard. They offer the belief that if people in their organization are ever going to be able to work on such important and difficult issues as race or gender, they must first explore such issues as styles of communication, or habits of punctuality, or preferences in clothing...

In other words, such managers are concerned about the lack of capacity of the people that populate their organization. They are concerned that their employees cannot productively handle the tension generated by an exploration of *real* diversity topics, and, as a result, they wish us to provide topics that produce a lower level of tension. Using a key concept described earlier, they want *help*.

In our view, any effort in the arena of social diversity should focus on those fundamental differences of identity that can decrease the contribution of some employees. Quality diversity education must explore such issues as race and heritage, gender, (generational) differences in age, significant physical differences such as being wheel chair bound or blind, and gay-straight issues.

Our position is that in every organization there are some difficulties with regard to the complexities of social diversity and, at the same time, there are many successes. It is always a mix. Our interest is in providing *support* to those organizations that wish to improve their climate with regard to issues of social diversity. In situations in which

client organizations seek diversity *help*, such as that described above, we are left with two options: On occasion, we succeed in educating our (potential) clients about aspects of our support model that might be of benefit to their organization. Sometimes we might simply refer them to our many colleagues who are happy to provide *diversity help*.

We are committed to the support approach because it is our belief that the vast majority of people in any large organization wish to treat others well, and desire to be treated well in return. Are there, in any organization, some people who harbor a dislike for those who are different from them on some significant dimension of identity? *Of course there are*. But, it is important that we not base our efforts of organizational enhancement on our understanding of the needs and motivations of that tiny minority.

Diversity change efforts must be built upon our understanding of the motivations and experiences of the majority of people with whom we work. Our experience tells us that most people are, to a degree, held in the grip of old habits and perceptions that guide their behavior when dealing with those who are significantly different from them. When people become more aware of these habits and perceptions, they are able to react to issues of difference in ways that are ultimately more productive for them and for those with whom they work.

We structure a very wide variety of organizational interventions in our efforts to support diversity success. Though the specifics vary, in all cases we use the same underlying methodological approaches: We use a discussion group designs because we believe that *skill development* should be central. If skills are to be enhanced, people must have the opportunity to practice in group settings. We model for our clients a curiosity about issues of social difference together with a sense of safety and comfort with these complex matters. We *support* our client groups in the moderation of *tension*. As people increase their capacity to handle tension productively, they increase their ability to engage these issues in depth. We teach skills of conflict resolution. Though these are obviously applicable to issues of diversity, they apply in many other contexts as well. We often use newspaper clippings, presenting

brief articles, advertisements, or even cartoons that are reflective of current diversity issues. We sometimes use videos, but these are not those that people usually expect. Most obviously, ours are edited to be very brief, often no more than ten or twelve minutes. We edit these videos for brevity because we understand that people cannot practice their skills by watching a film. The developmental benefit is extracted not from the video, but rather from the facilitated conversation that the video stimulates. In addition, we take videos from some unusual sources, they are not the typical “diversity videos” that many expect. This is because those more familiar documents are usually built upon the assumptions of the traditional diversity model described above.

Perhaps most important of all, in every case, we respond to the energies, desires, interests, and experiences of the people with whom we work. Even within a single organization, sessions with different groups are likely to differ from one another depending on their needs.

We know that people do not need to be told how to act because (in the overwhelming majority of cases) they are already motivated to treat others well. Instead, they merely need the opportunity to become more aware of the impact of their own behavior and perceptions so that they can, over time, bring them closer to their own, well intended, conscious goals.

Formulating Recommendations

Our firm has worked with a very wide variety of organizations in a consultative and training capacity for approximately twenty-five years. We mention this not to suggest the depth of our knowledge, but rather to offer a note of caution in the descriptions and suggestions that follow: We believe that they apply *generally*, but cannot be applied *specifically*. Even in those situations in which we have the opportunity to come to know a particular organization rather well, it is important that we remind ourselves (and the reader) that our perspectives are those of outsiders. Of course, our knowledge and experience as

organizational change consultants inform our perceptions of organizations, but those who live their professional lives in any organization, know it far more deeply than we ever could.

Over the years, we have had the opportunity to come to understand scores of organizations, and, indeed, they each have their own distinct “personality.” Those who assist organizations that wish to change productively can err at either extreme as they consider this issue. It is a mistake to view organizations as utterly unique because to do so is to deny the important benefits of learning from experience in varied organizational settings. If one were to deny the value of such experiences, the *only* valid insights would be those derived from experience with a particular organization. In effect, the consultant would be forced to “re-invent the wheel” in starting work with any client system. At the opposite extreme, we can err by acting out of the assumption that despite their surface distinctions, all organizations are fundamentally the same. To do so, is to deny the enormous influence of the specifics of organizational leadership, history, norms and culture - the characteristics which, taken together, form the organization’s *personality*.

No organization can be treated just as we might treat another. In our view, each client organization has a character *very much* its own. As a result, it is crucially important that we have the opportunity to learn as much as we can from our potential organizational clients.

We make no standard “off the shelf” recommendations. We wish to find, and then support, the ample resources that we believe to exist in every organizational setting. We develop these insights in partnership with those internal to the organization. Through interviews, both formal and informal, through observation of the organization’s activities, and through an understanding of the organization’s history, we can understand its unique situation. Once having learned of the client system’s strengths and resources, we can make suggestions “custom built” to meet specific organizational needs.

Because our interventions are based upon the needs of individual client groups, the extent, and character of our involvement varies. We have worked with clients for whom a half-day presentation was appropriate. We have worked with client systems for which the appropriate intervention was a years long organizational change effort involving a score of our associates, and thousands of organizational employees.

In all cases, our efforts have as their foundation our experience of twenty-five years together with an optimistic belief in the strengths and capacities of those we wish to assist.

And finally...

The material above is offered in our desire to share our thoughts with our many colleagues.

Of course, we sincerely value any reactions you might have.

If you wish to reach us, please call us at 866-659-3169, or send an email to downloads@soleassociates.com.

We thank you for your interest in our work...

Sole & Associates, Inc.