



The Biodiversity of Optimization

THE DIVERSITY OF SUPERPERFORMANCE

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By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

Albert Einstein

DIVERSITY IS A SECRET WEAPON

For years now diversity has been viewed as an obligation to the government. In reality, however, diversity is an organization's ability to optimize its differences. Organizations today have a secret weapon if they can develop cultures where diversity flourishes. There is no other intrinsic element of an organization that can produce the creative innovations, cultural health, and system breakthroughs that diversity can bring.

The reason diversity can offer up so many rewards is that it is the very property which allows organizations to thrive. In the throes of environmental turbulence, differences allow us to change and morph into new entities, ones better suited for the new environment. This is the natural process of diversity. Nature uses differences in a variety of ingenious ways, most obviously in producing creative responses to environmental change. Differences, not similarities, produce resilience—both in nature and in organizations.

DIVERSE CULTURE REDEFINED

In the recent past diversity has been targeted at increasing the representation of “different” people in organizations. Organizations have responded to the *compliance phase* of diversity by independently modifying systems, processes, hiring practices, outreach efforts, and talent acquisition strategies. Training interventions focusing on the pervading cultural characteristics was offered to help individuals work together more effectively.

All of these interventions are good things; however, the goal of diversity should not be diversity for the sake of compliance. Training interventions focusing on pervading cultural characteristics have generally been met with modestly sustained results, and have derailed many well-intended workforce diversity initiatives. In part this is due to the limited definition of diversity being used. Diversity is not just different people. It is much larger than that—embracing different work methods, different work styles, different ideas, and different outcomes. Optimization occurs where this fuller expression of diversity is encouraged and exploited.



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This broader definition enables us to genuinely move beyond compliance to optimization of the organization in total. A diverse culture contains different people in terms of race, gender, and age, certainly. But it also welcomes different opinions, different ways of seeing, different ideas, different personalities. A biodiverse culture is a culture that:

GOES FROM:

compliance
managing differences
values sameness
projecting mindsets
being divisive
controlling outcomes

TO:

commitment
optimizing differences
values completeness
deconstructing mindsets
being inclusive
encouraging innovation

Optimizing diversity enables organizations to fully engage all generations at work to achieve business results. Thus, fostering an environment of inclusion (where all employees feel valued) is the other half of the equation. When people have a clear understanding of the company mission, and how they fit in, they become more engaged, and the organization's full potential is unleashed.

BIO-ORGANIZATIONAL-DIVERSITY

A broader, more robust definition of diversity is congruent with new discoveries and learning in the natural sciences. Nature uses differences in a multitude of ways including:

complementarity (*differences provide mutual completion*)
co-evolution (*differences evolve in cooperation*)
entropy (*differences provide needed disequilibrium and growth*)

By understanding that an organization is a living organism, we can see diversity as a natural strength. It is not something to control or squelch; it is something to be cultivated and used. In order to do this, we must understand human behavior from a natural perspective. Our biological blind spot for working with differences necessitates methods and tools for individuals and organizations to uncover stereotypes and challenge assumptions. This breakthrough in diversity thinking, based on the biodiversity found in natural ecosystems, presents a new vision and hope for the maximization of all people in all organizations. Along with a solid commitment to the traditional business fundamentals of diversity, it also includes an understanding of diversity as a natural process by which organizations thrive, drawing on the lessons of biology and complexity science.



WHY A NEW DEFINITION IS REQUIRED

Workforce demographics are changing drastically. The government has tried to end discriminatory practices through legislation and targeted programs, but the effectiveness of "diversity management" has been limited. In order to harness the full power of diversity, a broader definition that encompasses more than just age, gender or ethnicity ("protected categories") is indeed required. This new definition is based on a view of organizations as dynamically alive and diversity as a natural strength. It is "diversity optimization" that is called for. Diversity optimization is diversity management wed to diversity leadership. We are many people but only one organization, we are in many ways different but also the same. By harnessing this complementarity, diversity optimization is a diversity for Superperformance.

The factors of age, gender and ethnicity continue to be important because they are vital components of an individual's identity and because they are drivers of fundamental demographic changes in the workforce. Emerging demographic trends continue to change the faces of America and the world. Currently, four generations of people are working side by side in the workplace. As the workforce continues to age and become generationally diverse, competing values appear.

As such, the compelling case for diversity cannot be entirely based on "best practices" as the academic literature tends to suggest; but one predicated on a value proposition that encompasses a business's strategic components and the environment where the actual work is performed. In examining the statistics and the implications these elements play, some important questions emerge:

- How do organizations address the challenges associated with an aging workforce?
- How do organizations provide a robust and adaptable learning platform to explore generational differences, values, and expectations?
- What are the contemporary implications of women in the workforce?
- What role does immigration play?
- Is there an identifiable global culture?
- What strategies foster more effective working relationships, increase productivity, and optimize diversity?

There is an important emerging division in the society of work which may become more divisive than ethnicity has been in the past. This factor is knowledge level. There is a growing disparity and polarization in society between those with a basic education and those without one. Consequently, the skill level of the global workforce is becoming a growing talent concern. The implications for organizations and countries are significant.



THE BASIC ELEMENTS

Diversity is about differences of all types, but it is not exclusively advocacy, sensitivity or project management. It is also not limited to age, gender or ethnicity.

Language is a powerful way to express our perceptions of others. It is also very easy for language to cause an unintended insult. There is fundamental information communicated through language and cultural identification issues— as well as additional knowledge regarding this new diversity definition. In every organization, the basic elements of the new biodiversity should be presented and explored. The question of what diversity is and what it is not should be explained. This includes understanding the importance of language and the complexity of individuals. Methods for overcoming mistakes and for preventing them should be considered.

Every culture is unique. Understanding cultures from a macro-level can help understand individuals and interactions with others. Cultural identity is commonly tied to five elements including time, work-style, personal space, decision-making and values. Although each person belongs to a specific culture, each also an individual. It is important to remember that an individual may not fit the typical cultural mold. The notion of treating others *with respect* is a core principle for diversity optimization in any culture and in any organization.

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY IN NATURE

How does diversity operate in nature? Based on learnings from biology and the new science of complexity, there are important implications and actions for organizations to take in order to leverage diversity as a strength.

How does nature respond to change? The answer is "it diversifies." It tries something different. The role of evolution, the need for openness to change and the power of resilience are important dimensions.

The principle of co-evolution is a cornerstone in any ecosystem. Co-evolution is the evolution of species through association. This is precisely how a rainforest thrives, an Arctic tundra supports life, or a coral reef grows. This includes understanding the role of cooperation and collaboration as well as co-evolution in business. Repulsion and attraction are two forces that use diversity to be more resilient. Repulsion is polarization. Attraction is the force which unifies and creates new systems. How organizations use these two forces is vital.



Open systems use chaos to develop into simpler or more complex systems. Those organizations that use diversity will seem chaotic. Self-organization, however, is the phenomenon of order growing out of chaos. Organizations embracing and using diversity will see the benefits of this balance between order and chaos.

OPTIMIZING DIVERSITY

Furthering the use of the natural model as the basis for understanding and resolving diversity issues includes uncovering stereotypes, increasing self-awareness, building shared values and understanding attribution.

Although the word "stereotyping" has a negative connotation, it is a natural and biological process. There are identifiable "brain" habits which cause stereotypes to develop. In addition, there are common types of stereotyping in organizations. The first step in combating stereotyping is to increase self-awareness. Each individual is culturally and biologically unique. This makes it difficult to describe a representative cultural experience. There are two dimensions of personal diversity (a core and a secondary) which produce our own cultural filters. Optimizing diversity will require a change from traditional corporate cultures. Fostering an environment of inclusion that truly optimizes diversity will require work, commitment, and different styles of operation on the part of everyone.

How can we come together and work effectively when we are individually and culturally so complex? Self-awareness is critical for working with and using diversity. Methods for increasing self-awareness and group awareness must be continually explored.

Uncovering assumptions and attributions that we make is another way to work more effectively with differences. One well-known model used to identify preconceptions and misunderstandings is the Ladder of Inference, conceived by MIT's Chris Argyris. By uncovering the attributions we make, and tracing the internal thought processes we use to draw flawed conclusions, we can work together more effectively.

UNLEASHED ENERGY

The organization's mission determines its strategic goals and direction. Its mission is an essential component needed to develop team unity, commitment, and the overall level of group effectiveness. The power of diversity is enormous. Instead of controlling differences and forcing homogeneity, organizational



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resilience is increased through creative couplings and the permutation of ideas, opinions, people, and their partners. The goal of diversity is to bridge the gap among all stakeholders and optimize the knowledge, skills, and abilities of everyone to achieve business results. It's clear that diversity is good for business. Organizations cannot afford to leave anyone out—and if the goal of diversity is inclusion, why would they? Advances in diversity thinking warrant a view where the focus is on systemic wholeness and interdependence of parts, rather than independent analysis and separation of components. This is organism thinking, not machine thinking. Organism thinking is integral to inclusion, and necessary for optimization.

The biodiversity of optimization is the diversity of Superperformance.



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ABOUT CARMEN CARTER

Carmen M. Carter is Biodiversity Advisor and Partner for Corpus Optima. In this capacity Carmen leads the Diversity Optimization Practice for the firm and guides all client initiatives in this area. Her international reputation for innovation and understanding in the field place her among the foremost voices in the diversity community. She is the Founder of the Multicultural Women’s Council™, a nonprofit organization created to help empower women from all walks of life to achieve gender parity by breaking barriers to full participation in the world of work and commerce. She is the Principal of InsideDiversity™, a human capital and diversity coaching organization, and author of “Do It Yourself Diversity™”. She has over 20 years of professional experience that spans academia, faith-based, and government organizations, as well as has held executive roles with Fortune 500 companies in multiple industries.

Carmen has been recognized for her ability to design and deploy robust and creative, yet cost-effective human capital and diversity optimization strategies. In this capacity, she has served Career Builder’s Personified®, National Diversity Council, Direct Energy, State Farm Insurance, Reliant Energy, Novations, Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc., International Mentoring Association, SYSCO Corporation, Marathon Oil, GE Medical Systems, National Urban League, United Way of Texas, Houston Independent School District, and others. She is the recipient of numerous awards for business achievement and servant leadership. Among these are the “Texas Diversity in Leadership Award” from the Texas Diversity Council, “Woman of Excellence” Award by the Federation of Houston Professional Women, “40 Under 40” Award by Rolling Out Magazine, and has been named “One of Corporate America’s Top Diversity Leaders” by Diversity Inc.com. Her work has been featured in publications such as *Business Week*, *The Mentoring Institute New Dimensions Journal*, and *the International Mentoring Association Journal*.

Carmen is a former faith-based director and board member for several organizations, and is often a guest facilitator and motivational speaker, conducting various learning seminars on human capital development and optimization, mentoring, diversity and empowerment. She is an honors graduate with a MS in Industrial and Labor Relations from the University of Wisconsin and also holds a BS in Accounting with honors from Jackson State University. Carmen is a graduate of Leadership Houston, Associate Faculty member at the University of Phoenix, and has served as Chief Diversity Officer for the National Diversity Council, sits on the Board of Directors for the International Mentoring Association, and is currently the Host of InsideDiversity – The Power of Intelligence Radio. Carmen and her family reside in Houston, Texas.





ABOUT CORPUS OPTIMA

Corpus Optima is a management and leadership coaching, consulting and education company specializing in organizational Superperformance. Corpus Optima leverages the best of improvement and complexity science to amplify process and culture together. These concepts are based on the book *Superperformance: New Profound Knowledge for Corporate Leaders*, by Dave Guerra, co-founder and managing partner. Corpus Optima, founded in 1996, serves a growing list of Fortune 500, prominent healthcare, and nonprofit community organizations. For more information, contact us at 281-893-1845 or email info@corpusoptima.com.

