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# Beyond vanilla: diversity as a driver of growth

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*"The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes, in seeing the universe with the eyes of another, of hundreds of others, in seeing the hundreds of universes that each of them sees." — Marcel Proust*



ONE step forward, two steps back? One can hardly pick up a local newspaper or business magazine without there being something about a new black economic empowerment (BEE) deal, the appointment of a new senior black executive or another charter in the pipeline. These indicators suggest we are making some progress in our efforts to transform our economy.

However, it is concerning that in the mad rush to create and meet targets, we may be missing the point of what transformation should be about. It is somewhat like a study where subjects were asked to watch a video of baseball players and count how many times the players threw a

ball back and forth to one another. Most subjects were so engrossed in watching the players that they failed to notice a huge gorilla walk through the middle of the field, beat his chest and walk off!

So what is the gorilla, so to speak, walking unnoticed through our field of vision? It is the human wealth that South African organisations are failing to develop by more effectively embracing and living the diversity of our people, cultures and perspectives. The diversity of our people is one of our most underutilised national assets. It could provide the dynamism, creative energy and innovative ways of thinking and problem-solving required to compete successfully in an increasingly complex and multicultural local and global business context.

And, although we are hearing some forward-thinking executives talk about the need to embrace and respect diversity, we are yet to see much evidence of new paradigms that will enable meaningful transformation. Most frequently we are seeing a dominant mode of political correctness that goes something like this: We acknowledge the injustices of the past and seek to create an environment where everybody is treated equally, free of prejudice and discrimination. So, when we walk

through these doors we are all the same, blind to racial, gender and cultural differences. These sentiments are usually accompanied by a concerted effort to restructure the organisation to "better reflect the demographics of our society".

And generally several mechanisms, such as mentoring, differential spend on training, fast-tracking and cultural sensitivity programmes are put in place to support this restructuring process.

This is, of course a start, but the spirit of this form of transformation almost invariably remains target-driven. It is essentially about the recruitment, retention and progression of the right numbers of "previously disadvantaged" people. As a result, the demographic make-up of the organisation may change, but there is little impact on the organisational culture. In this kind of environment, people are effectively asked to check their authentic selves at the door and to conform to an organisational "type" when they get to work. Invariably, this type is based on a dominant (white and/or male) culture.

In other words, everyone is welcome and, to misquote Henry Ford, "You can have any flavour you want ... as long as it's vanilla!" Being encouraged to wear "traditional dress" at functions, learning a few Zulu phrases and putting a few so-called "ethnic" African prints on the wall simply reinforce assimilation into the dominant culture.

Why are we not moving on? Well, most organisations are victims of what Tom Peters and Robert Waterman called, nearly 25 years ago, the "deadly attitudes" of short-term orientation, shallow thinking and the pursuit of quick fixes. As a result the overriding objective of diversity efforts is almost inevitably to outrun

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the chasing pack to reach the (moving) demographic targets outlined in various charters and government legislation.

Our concern here is not with the legislation and other external pressures driving these companies to change; without these, many companies would not be moving far or fast enough. Our concern is instead with the attitudes that inform the diversity agenda.

On one hand, these are governed by resignation to the fact that BEE is part of the "cost of doing business" in SA, and so a grudging resolution to comply with legislation and targets to the exact letter of the law. On the other hand, they are driven by a sense of entitlement, based on many, many years of struggle and disadvantage.

There are obviously deep tensions between these two points on the spectrum but, because it all gets dressed up in the language of political correctness, we end up with a diversity agenda that is defined in a far too narrow and superficial manner. As a result, too few companies are approaching the challenge of meaningfully transforming the workplace with enough energy, rigour and (once one adds the vagaries of political correctness) with their critical faculties intact.

**P**UTTING aside obvious sociopsychological concerns about this form of transformation for the time being, think about the implications

from a purely business perspective. We have to operate in a world that is, in many ways, unrecognisable from

that of a generation ago, one increasingly characterised by change, risk, complexity and uncertainty. And yet, the way in which we are taught to conceive of and cope in this world has not kept up with the rapid pace of change.

More specifically, in South African business, the view of the organisation as machine and the principles of rational, even scientific management are still the dominant paradigm. However, this so-called "scientific" approach to making sense of an increasingly complex environment is no longer adequate. It essentially creates an illusion that business is predictable and controllable, when the reality is that wherever one looks, inside and outside organisations, one finds disequilibrium, non-linear relationships, temporality and ambiguity.

It is no coincidence therefore that we are seeing ever-increasing performance volatility and growing numbers of business failures. In this turbulent environment we need to embrace a new mode of thinking and leading. There is an ever-growing body of theory that calls for us to view the organisation as a living, essentially human, system rather than as a machine. A system in which, as in life, diversity — truly embracing unique and different ways of thinking and doing things — provides the organisation with the capacity to evolve and adapt to a changing business environment.

Critically though, while demographic diversity is certainly a step in the right direction, without the right organisational context its positive impact will always be limited. In fact, if the context is not one that enables and even encourages people to draw on their personal perspectives and strengths, then diversity is more likely to lead to an uncomfortable and unproductive conformity where real issues and tensions remain unresolved because they are never allowed to surface.

And it is in this kind of environment that deep-seated, unconscious prejudices that undermine transformation processes continue to prevail, the consequences of which have been tellingly described by Steven Friedman, a research fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies: "In business and the professions ... deeply pervasive prejudices decide

who has ability and who not; ... it is dressed up as support for 'merit' and it infests the thinking of many who believe, genuinely, that they are not prejudiced.... It can influence black people as well as whites, ensuring that black talent is not developed.... And the effect in lost performance, loss of self-esteem and anger from the thwarted is much the same. It may well cost us far more lost growth and achievement than all the other factors we often cite."

So what needs to change? Fundamentally, what needs to change is the attitude with which we engage one another around transformation of the workplace. This is less an intellectual reasoning process than it is about becoming more aware of how we and others see and make sense of the world, and how our habitual patterns of thinking and acting often unconsciously lock us into fixed positions that cause us to talk past one another.

While there are no simple tools or processes to support this attitude change, there is a relatively simple mode of communication that will provide some pointers along a path towards a state that is more whole and human.

**T**HE way we can begin to truly live our diversity involves meaningfully embracing the richness of varied perspectives and approaches which members of different identity groups bring to the workplace. This requires a mode of deeply human interaction. And, because the world around us is complex and ambiguous, it requires that differences are explicitly surfaced and not only celebrated but also confronted.

It is in the heterogeneity of and even tensions between different ideas, perspectives and practices that we will learn to adapt to and thrive in a constantly changing business environment. It is in this kind of context — where people are encouraged to bring their authentic selves to work and fully contribute — that South African organisations will begin to realise the real potential to leverage diversity for improved business performance.

But where do we begin? The starting point must be a realisation that genuine transformation is almost certainly a deeply personal and often difficult journey. It may require

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of us that we fundamentally challenge our own sense of self, that which we perceive to give us meaning in this world.

The first step on this journey is to surface and recognise our "mental models". These are those assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes (based on a number of factors, including race, gender, age, religion and nationality) that shape our understanding of the world and influence our behaviour.

The biggest danger with these mental models is that we are often not even aware of the uniqueness of our individual interpretation of the world we see — we believe that our perspective of the world is an objective one and that what we see is the "truth" of the world.

Entrenched mental models are the reason why the "deeply pervasive prejudices" that Friedman refers to continue to persist, and why even people who fervently believe they are not prejudiced will play their part in institutionalising an outmoded dominant culture (and this applies equally to white and black people, male and female).

Importantly, the process of surfacing our mental models and ultimately growing our sense of self, requires conscious and active choices. The first, and perhaps most critical choice, is our attitude towards interacting with others.

Too often we view one another not as partners in a living, growing relationship, but rather in terms of rigid positions with which to agree

or disagree. This mode of communicating with others is one in which we feel compelled to hold onto and defend our differences. This leads us, on one hand, to strongly advocate our own point of view while, on the other hand, attributing meaning and motives to what others say and do without actively inquiring into what they really mean or intend.

However positive we believe our own intentions to be, as long as we engage one another in this mode we will always be talking past one another, attacking or defending, blind to generative possibilities.

We can instead choose an attitude informed by an intense curiosity; a desire to explore and discover rather than impose and dominate; to push the boundaries of our potential and that of others.

What this requires, first and foremost, is for us to listen to one another. Listening seems like such a simple act, but in this fragmented, hurly-burly world where we ourselves seem so desperate to be heard, it is an uncommon form of communication.

The Indian philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurtu, characterised it as follows: "If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate we hardly listen to what is being said. In that state there is no value at all. One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence in

which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems to me, it is possible to communicate."

It is only once we are truly present, once we are willing to sit and just listen to the stories, perspectives and differences of others, that we will begin to build fundamentally different kinds of relationships. To do this, we need to suspend our own voices of judgment and instead challenge ourselves to learn something new about the other person. We need to subvert our all too human need to sound clever, push an opinion or offer advice. It is only then that we can begin to engage in simple, unaffected, human conversation.

We need to listen for differences, rather than listening for points that agree with our own perspectives. As we listen to and acknowledge the human experiences of others, our differences will become meeting

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points rather than barriers; meeting points at which we can explore, learn, inquire, create and, ultimately, add to our own humanity. This is the fertile ground from which business leaders can ensure sustainable growth and this, surely, is what transformation and diversity should be all about.

Give it a try.

■ *Michael Lalor is director of strategy and innovation at Ernst & Young. David Lapin is CEO of Strategic Business Ethics, an international consultancy specialising in the linkages between strategy, culture and business performance.*