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Fall 2008

# The Universal Case for Diversity, Inclusion and Intercultural Collaboration in Organizational and Societal Change

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## The Universal Case for Diversity, Inclusion and Intercultural Collaboration in Organizational and Societal Change

By Effenus Henderson

As Organization Development professionals and practitioners grapple with the present state and the future of OD work, I want to offer some thoughts and observations about diversity and inclusion from recent dialogue and discussions involving leaders from around the world at a series of United Nations sponsored events.

### The Global Imperative Background

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by 185 Member States in 2001, represents the first international standard-setting instrument aimed at preserving and promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. This Declaration is an appropriate document upon which to begin a conversation about diversity and inclusion:

*“Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up mankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.”*

### Dialogue Group at the United Nations

In October 2007, I had the privilege of addressing a high level Dialogue Group on

Intercultural and Inter Religious Diversity, sponsored by the United Nations and held in New York at the UN. In preparing for this opportunity, I wanted to make sure that I could speak intelligently about how religion and intercultural differences must be considered as a critical and important part of the emerging global imperative on diversity and inclusion.

In my preparation, I came to realize how limited my world knowledge of religion and spiritual differences actually is. I became aware that world religions included a far greater number of spiritual practices than I had ever considered. I recognized how uninformed I was and how isolated I and many people are in understanding and accepting religious differences.

I have come to believe that ignorance of these differences is too widespread and serves only to divide us.

These learnings helped me realize that the concept of cross cultural collaboration and respect for difference as an imperative goes beyond the classic definition of the *American business case*. It became clear to me that the importance of the imperative is universal and key to our continued evolution and the long-term sustainability of our planet. Problems concerning the environment, issues pertaining to human rights, and efforts to mitigate and eliminate war, cannot be fully realized without a healthy respect for difference and diversity. And, a healthy respect for difference is vital to change – personal, organizational, intercultural and global.

## Annual Alliance of Civilizations Forum

The universal notion of diversity became even more apparent to me at the Annual Alliance of Civilizations Forum held in Madrid, Spain in January 2008. There I witnessed heads of state, religious organizations, and private industries articulating and passionately committing to a much more powerful notion of diversity and inclusion in global dialogue, peacekeeping, economic development and decision-making than I had previously experienced.

As a diversity officer, I was keenly aware of the growing business imperative, centered on compliance and the war for talent, with increasing pressure from shareholders for greater transparency. At the meeting in Spain, I became aware also of challenges from communities that are not adequately represented in the workforce and who are pressuring organizations for greater inclusion and participation. Activist and civic groups were questioning global companies about their social responsibility, specifically with regard to their social practices.

Here I heard Heads of State and NGOs, European and Middle Eastern CEOs, and other civil society leaders state their belief that growing global diversity presents a set of challenges and opportunities within and between societies that must be proactively addressed for the greater good of all.

At this Annual Alliance of Civilizations Forum, groups of leaders wanted to explore some of the primary political issues and conflicts that threaten to polarize communities and nations across cultural, religious, and other lines, thereby threatening international stability. Many of the challenges are imbedded in cultural and religious history and need careful examination for ways to improve the current situations. Highlighted were issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation in Iraq, widespread political repression in predominantly Muslim countries and growing polarization of views around the world.

Impeding required change is individual and national fundamentalist

arrogance, wherein governments and civil societies do not fully understand, appreciate or respect the traditions and values that other civilizations have honed over centuries. Arrogance is being displayed in conduct that gives way to humiliation, disrespect and intolerance of differences. Additionally, it has led to hard-core fundamentalist behaviors that proclaim some religious beliefs to be inferior to those of others. This modern day arrogance has led to war and protectionist strategies by countries and governments, for example by Christian-Judaic and Islamic, Indian and Pakistanian and Chinese and Tibetan nations.

What became most apparent from this session was the elevation of global diversity to the same level of importance of previously pressing issues such as corporate social responsibility, concern for the environment, peace keeping, economic prosperity, human rights, and organizational transparency.

## Organizational and Societal Development on a Global Scale

In addressing the emerging issue of global diversity and inclusion at the Summit meeting, countless leaders mentioned key themes fundamental to the required change process. What became apparent was that real solutions will take time, a disciplined process and a set of fundamental principles to drive the work toward the desired state. Many organization development experts realize this at the corporate level; however, more understanding is required at societal levels.

Let me offer several principles for societal change that emerged from the discussion.

- » Build strategies on principles and values that are shared.
- » Insure that problem solving is both collaborative and based on healthy and respectful relationships.
- » Focus strategies on common global priorities and issues – minimizing war, addressing global environmental and health issues, increasing innovation and creativity, and supporting fundamental human rights by all.

- » Foster cultural inclusion and integration, rather than cultural assimilation.
- » Lead from an ethical and respectful base.
- » Insure transparency in actions and behavior.
- » Build inclusive strategies that seek to engage governments, civil society, private industry, and key religious leaders in strategy formation.
- » Lead with a healthy respect and appreciation for the different perspectives such sectors bring.
- » Seek mutually beneficial outcomes.

## From Diversity to Inclusion

The Alliance of Civilization's Forum represented one of the most diverse intercultural group of leaders at all levels and classes – ethnically, religiously, culturally as well as in other markers of diversity – organization, government, private industry, and civil society. Attendees at this event came adorned with garments and other manifestation of their culture and customs. Their comments and actions were not hampered by their cultural garb but rather seemed enhanced by it. It was truly remarkable to experience dialogue and discussion focused on strategies to make this global mixture of diversity work by solving shared aspirations and goals in the colorful environment of multiple cultures.

Gone were discussions about representation, absent were strategies to assimilate and conform. Present was a genuine and healthy desire to create constructive dialogue in which this diverse group could continue the debate on the issues common to all humanity.

## A Bias towards Action

In the course of discussion and debate, I observed Queen Noor of Jordan treating representatives from around the world as equal citizens rather than servants. I saw religious leaders providing healthy input in spite of their spiritual differences and also healthy engagement of State leaders and private industry representatives.

It reminded me that the first step in an organizational change process is careful attention to preparing the leaders to champion the desired change. It also reminded me that change must be girded with a design and a set of guiding principles that define the context for the strategy going forward.

Themes and objectives emerged from this collaborative effort of world leaders that were refreshing and compelling. They suggested that governments, private industries and NGOs engage in the following:

- » Set the stage by conducting healthy discussion at the policy making level aimed at promoting better inter-cultural understanding, and preventing the mounting of tensions and the rise of extremism/
- » Build effective and inclusive partnerships with various multilateral agencies and organizations that reinforce the business case and the competitive advantages of doing so.
- » Establish a clearinghouse for the purpose of educating and building literacy in the work that needs to be done.
- » Develop a rapid response media mechanism, beginning with an online resource that features an inclusive and global list of experts in cross-cultural issues available for help.
- » Target programs and strategies for facilitating intercultural and interfaith dialogue among our youth. Start by establishing a Solidarity Fund.
- » Build a global network of philanthropic foundations and private funders to support raising awareness, identifying and resolving mutual needs and ways to leverage resources.
- » Create and sustain a network of good will ambassadors made up of prominent high profile, internationally recognized figures from the world of politics, culture, sports, business and entertainment to help in promoting the efforts, highlighting activities and drawing attention to activities.
- » Obtain commitment from the UN Global Compact office to produce publications that highlight and raise

the visibility of best practices in the corporate sector toward supporting cross-cultural relations.

- » Seek the adoption of an action oriented statement of solidarity and joint commitment from diverse religious leaders toward providing youth with guidance to counter extreme influence, promoting a sense of shared security in their various constituencies, and elevating the role of women in future religious projects.

### Organization Development at the Crossroads

World leaders are articulating needs for change that will challenge traditional notions of organization development and transformation. Wangari Maathia, Nobel Peace Prize winner, captured this thinking when she said: “Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life support systems. We are called to assist the earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own – indeed to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.”

### What Should OD Practitioners Be Thinking About?

The global neighborhood that we live in is being ravaged by war, pestilence, environmental disaster and greed. These conditions are affecting the abundance that humanity needs to sustain itself over time. The question is how should organization development practitioners reinvent themselves to help address these emerging issues in a diverse world?

- 1) Organization Development Consultants must hone their skills in cultural and intercultural competency. According to author, Jean Lau Chin (2007):
 

*“Cultural Competence is the development of skills by individuals and systems to live and work with, educate and serve diverse individuals and communities. It is the willingness and ability of a system to value the importance of culture in the delivery of services to all segments of the*

*population. It is the use of a systems perspective which values differences and is responsive to diversity at all levels of an organization, i.e., policy, governance, administrative, workforce, provider, and consumer/client.*

*“Cultural competence is developmental, community focused, family oriented, and culturally relevant. In particular, it is the attention to the needs of underserved and racial/ethnic groups, and the integration of cultural attitudes, beliefs, and practices into diagnosis and treatment, education and training, and workplace environments. It is the continuous promotion of skills, practices and interactions to ensure that services are culturally responsive and competent.”*

Chin continues:

*“Culturally Competent activities include developing skills through training, using self-assessment tools, and implementing goals and objectives to ensure that governance, administrative policies and practices, and clinical skills and practices are responsive to diversity within the populations served.”*

- 2.) Organization Development consultants need to understand the context for their work and in accordance with the context use their well honed cultural competency skills to shape the changes required. Change is affected by individual vantage points (what we bring to the table), nested cultures (cultures within cultures), unspoken covenants (ways of life), shifting neighborhoods, technological innovations, and emerging new power bases (how communities of interest are taking shape). These factors all affect the velocity of change.

### Vantage Points

We need to understand our individual vantage points also and how they affect change. Condition, circumstance, culture and heritage are all part of a vantage

point. Each vantage point sets the context for collaboration, understanding and appreciation. Hearts are warmed or hardened to those thought to be different based on our unique perspectives and Inclusive mindsets help to bridge varied vantage points.

Phillippe Rosinski, a life coach and consultant based in Brussels, Belgium in his book, *Coaching Across Cultures*, offers how coaching can be leveraged for global success. The author introduces important cultural dimensions via his *Cultural Orientations Framework* that apply world wide and deal with time, ways of communicating, exploring identity, negotiating territory and boundaries, power differences, and organizing as a group.

Rosinski has woven culture and coaching into a valuable resource to help coaches integrate the cultural dimension into their work and to help interculturalists apply coaching methods to their training and consulting.

### **Nestled Cultures**

Change takes time. It is important to appreciate that cultures and societies have evolved over many years and that their beliefs and values have been honed in the process. Humanity seems to have a natural propensity to keep out and protect the legacy and heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation. Change processes must include developing mutual or shared outcomes in spite of the many differences that are represented.

A significant barrier is the concern that by becoming familiar with those from other cultures and tenets of behavior we might somehow obscure and marginalize our own existence. However, in spite of our cultural differences, we must learn to be more adaptive and to seek areas of mutual benefit.

### **Unconscious Bias or Unspoken Covenants**

Unconscious bias is an emerging major impediment to change. This bias is often unspoken, unseen and for many unrealized. Behavior and response become perfected and automatic, and bias becomes

hidden in the subconscious mind. We often say, "I don't know why I like this person, or that person, but I do." Or, I don't know why I dislike that person but I do." Many psychologists believe such bias and implicit response is the product of centuries of societal and family conditioning.

Unconscious bias, whether directed at minorities, women, individuals in other countries or any form of difference is the most significant challenge to change and collaborative problem solving. We must learn to recognize and ferret out this negative behavior and hidden bias as it is a most important barrier to change.

### **Diversity in Civil Society**

Exclusion has been a way of life in many civil societies throughout history. In some societies certain people have been relegated to specific communities based on class, income, status or other defining characteristics. During the Jim Crow era in America, laws were pretty specific and clear in their prescriptions for people of color and women. These laws restricted African Americans, Asians and other minorities to certain communities and limited access to education, housing and employment. Evolving from this systemic discrimination were patterns of interaction and rules of behavior that institutionalized segregation and disrespect. Left powerless by a society that shunned such people into second-class citizenship, survival depended on solidarity and protection for one another. Conscious and unconscious patterns of behavior and interaction emerged to guide actions.

The one certainty across the globe is that exclusion is diverse and will grow more so in the future. New inclusive principles will need to be considered if we hope to achieve global sustainability. Such principles will need to reinforce collaboration and engagement at all societal levels. Sustainable change will not occur if those fundamental to the change process are excluded or ignored in the decision-making process.

### **The Locus of Power**

As the world becomes more diverse

western civilization will not dominate global change as it has in the past. As the United States and other western countries participate on the world stage, their systems, practices and processes will have to be adjusted to accommodate the growing influence of humanity from Asian, African and other third world countries.

Change processes will need to adapt as civil society becomes more heterogeneous and consumers more diverse. This will present increasing pressure for inclusion at the locus of power that includes board rooms and senior management groups in all kinds of organizations, and the government's elite.

### **Emergence of the Networked World**

The networked revolution, accelerated by advances in technology, has created several new dynamics. First, information is shared with people at levels and speeds not seen until recent years. Global internet connections are making this easier and information is available much more readily to everyone.

Secondly, there are fewer barriers to becoming an informed consumer and advocate which helps to build societal capacity and advocacy for change by a collective whole. This is being facilitated by the development of social networks and alliances. Perspectives, strategies, and actions are quickly honed and aggressively carried out with lightening speed. The pace will only quicken in the future.

Consider the work of Ricken Patel, President of AVAAZ.org when he addressed the work of his social network:

*As major new challenges like climate change and escalating religious conflict threaten our common future, people from around the world are coming together to take global politics into their own hands. Avaaz.org (Our name means "Voice" or "Song" in several languages including Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Nepalese, Dari, Turkish, and Bosnian) is a community of global citizens who take action on the major issues facing the world today. Our aim is to ensure that the views and values of the world's people -- and not just political elites and unaccountable*

*corporations -- shape global decisions. Avaaz.org members are taking action for a more just and peaceful world and a vision of globalization with a human face. In our inter-connected world, the actions of political leaders and corporations are having a profound impact on all of us.*

Social networks (of employees, activists, and family members, communities of interest around the world) are facilitating causes, redefining work and confronting emerging issues much more thoughtfully. According to News Corp, the parent company of My Space, a major social networking site, nearly one in four Americans used My Space in June of 2007.

This capability creates a new dynamic in organizations and society as a whole and will be an area of great concern by those leading organization changes in the future.

#### **In Summary**

The work in front of us can be summed up in the words of HRH Prince Hassan bin Talel in his remarks to the Alliance when he said:

*“In a new century already scarred by tragic conflict, we must maintain our faith in the power of the human mind and spirit to overcome the myriad of challenges before us ... My personal blue print for humanitarian action consists of eight main themes: human solidarity, dialogue, security, multilateralism, democracy, culture and education, and universal consciousness.”*

The Prince goes on further to say:

*“The ethic of human solidarity reflects certain values that are intrinsic to mankind’s collective consciousness; respect for life, recognition of human dignity and a sense of responsibility towards future generations...”*

Democracy is a prominent theme in the post – 9/11 world, but the question is how diverse societies can move fully into the 21st century without losing cultural authenticity or popular legitimacy. Unique

Effenus Henderson is the Chief Diversity Officer for Weyerhaeuser Company. In this role he is responsible for overseeing workforce representation and advises the CEO and senior management team on diversity related matters. Henderson is an internationally recognized expert in the area and was named as one of the top diversity officers in corporate America by Diversity Best Practices/Working Mother Media and received one of the organization’s first Diversity Officer Leadership Awards in 2007.

Henderson serves as Trustee on the National Urban League Board and is a former member of its Executive Committee. Additionally, he serves on the Board of the Western Region, Boy Scouts of America and was awarded the Whitney Young Award for outstanding service in the community by the Boy Scouts of America. He serves on the Northwest Advisory Council for the United Negro College Fund.

In October 2007, Henderson addressed members of the General Assembly of the United Nations on intercultural and interreligious diversity. He also addressed a high level panel at the United Nations first forum of the Alliance of Civilizations in Madrid, Spain in January of 2008. In July, 2008 he was invited by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, United Nations to help plan the 60th Anniversary Celebration of Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris France. Henderson was one of 100 Global Diversity Thought Leaders invited by the president of the Society of Human Resource Management to a special forum in April 2008 to provide a perspective on the future of global diversity and inclusion.

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cultures need not betray their own foundations in order to realize universal human aspirations. Without compromising our core human principles, we can look to a future of diverse democracies and multiple modernities, drawing strength from unity in difference.

The question in the end is this one: How can we craft a better world without the engagement and involvement of diverse people from around the world? Change agents, diversity practitioners, organization development professionals have a key role in shaping this future and in helping to lead the way.