

Definitions

Diversity—Beyond the Jargon

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“When we as human beings recognize that the only way to see ourselves clearly is through the eyes of another, we will be willing to allow the contributions of other cultures to enhance us.”

It happens all the time. You are in a conversation that begins to approach a delicate subject, perhaps it's politics, or religion, or maybe race relations, and someone slips in one of those words that we all say we understand but that are so overused that the meaning has become vague. Words like *alignment* (“We need to get alignment...”) or *incredible* (nearly everything has become “incredible”) or *breakthrough* (“I had a breakthrough”). Using jargon is a good way to avoid the discomfort that can occur when sensitive subjects are discussed.

The word *diversity* has become jargon too, and because of this, when we are addressing issues of diversity, we risk not creating the depth needed to create a real *breakthrough*.

Routine Assignment

Personal Mastery Programs had the opportunity to facilitate a meeting of the leadership team from a large midwest university. This group of dedicated and highly qualified educators was to do some *visioning*. The leaders had begun a strategic planning process and thought it would be a good idea to create alignment regarding where they thought the institution should head in the foreseeable future. This seemed to be a simple enough challenge.

It was easy enough for this group to see how the athletic department could create excitement and a sense of community both within the student body and with the public. All group members could see how a strong academic reputation could have a positive effect on the future. The vision for a vibrant, supportive, and challenging center of academic learning was emerging.

The conversation was going well, until someone mentioned the word DIVERSITY! They said that if this institution was to be successful in the future it needed to embrace and be a bastion for diversity. Every head around the table bobbed up and down in agreement. Yes, of course, diversity must be at the top of any list

of descriptors for our future and there was no need to even discuss it.

However, PMP was being paid to facilitate a discussion that had depth and meaning, and so we asked, “Diversity—what do you mean by diversity?” Silence fell over the room. What was once a vibrant and flowing conversation was now stalled.

Diversity Means More

After what felt like a long silence, someone in the back of the room said in a small voice “you know... lots of different kinds of people.” Silence settled back over us. “Well,” someone else finally spoke, “I think diversity means more than just having different kinds of people around. I think it means creating an environment that promotes sharing and learning from a wide variety of cultures.” More heads bobbed.

“... we have been directed by both the state and federal government to achieve certain standards that are very specific,” said the Director of Diversity. “... it is my job to ensure that designated *minorities* are given equal opportunities to be successful at our school.” There were more opinions on what this thing called diversity really was and what we needed to do to achieve it.

PMP again jumped in, “Instead of first looking at what we need to do or how we need to act, describe your view of the future if your vision for DIVERSITY was realized. If diversity is truly embraced at our university, what will this future look like?”

After a long silence, someone said, “It’s not easy to create the ultimate vision of diversity. There are many contradictions in the way.” Someone else added “If everyone needs to get along with each other we will need to eliminate the things that get in the way but those same things that get in the way may be the things that distinguish us as diverse.”

Then the eldest member of this leadership team spoke: “Perhaps the change needs to occur not in our processes or in our strategic plan. Perhaps the change must occur in each of us. We speak of *culture* as if it is something that we have no control over. It’s as if a culture has some attachment to our DNA or an inherited trait like brown eyes or blonde hair. Cultures are the unwritten rules of engagement in any social order. A culture defines what we expect from each other and what we are willing to put up with from each other. But we are not tied to these rules by anything other than choice—conscious and subconscious. When we as human beings begin to recognize that we have the ability and the need to choose the parts of our personal cultures that we are proud to display and change the areas of our culture that need to be improved then we will grow beyond the limits of our past. When we as human beings recognize that the only way to see ourselves clearly is through the eyes of another, we will be willing to allow the contributions of other cultures to enhance us.”

It was a profound moment. It was driven home that to truly achieve diversity, we must each allow the contribution of others to penetrate. We must be willing to hear from others what we may not feel comfortable hearing and we must be willing to say to others, in the spirit of support, the things that we are uncomfortable saying. And we must be willing to trust that what is being said is meant to contribute, not diminish.

The real work of diversity is clear... we must learn to TRUST.

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