

Chapter Structure

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Introduction

One of the challenges in dealing with diversity in the workplace is that because it is complex and emotionally charged, it is often addressed in a simplistic and idealistic way. This chapter will attempt to highlight key issues connected with leadership, raising a few of the important questions, rather than seek comprehensive answers to the questions raised by diversity. Leaders are becoming more aware of both the 'business case' of addressing diversity, and the moral case; yet there is still much to do. The business case grows stronger in a global and increasingly competitive environment. It can be summarized thus: true meritocracy is a means to competitive edge, excluding people for irrelevant reasons because they are different prevents us from being the best we can be, and monocultures limit creativity, which is a by-product of diversity.

Addressing leadership and diversity raises two questions. How can leaders improve their organization's capacity to:

- 1 embrace diversity?
 - 2 recognize the challenges facing marginalized and diverse groups to take up leadership roles?
- The first question raises issues of education, understanding the challenges, the power relations and the unconscious dynamics that, in spite of goodwill, still make embracing diversity challenging. The second question emanates from the first, but carries with it specific issues about leadership. For example there has been a lot of progress in gender equality in many areas in the workplace, yet in boardrooms women still are very marginalized.

Locating Ourselves, to Recognize the Other

To address diversity is to acknowledge difference. To acknowledge difference we have to firstly recognize and locate ourselves. We all carry personal, social and historical culture/baggage within us, and however 'PC' (politically correct) we are, however progressive or liberal, we all belong to social groups, which exclude others, and we all make value judgements on a daily basis, often at unconscious levels. Some differences are easily recognized – gender and ethnicity – yet even here we can be tripped up, making assumptions about another, when less obvious differences also exist. To address difference we must first 'decriminalize bias'¹, not trying to eliminate difference but to recognize we are all different and we all carry biases within our cultures and ourselves. Biases do not just belong to 'evil racists', and bias itself is not the problem. When bias gets used to oppress, to marginalize, it becomes a problem. Becoming more conscious of our unconscious, personal assumptions and biases is important if we are to become more aware of others' experience. Our social and cultural bias is more difficult to see as it becomes 'normative'. A gay friend of mine in the USA told me how he watched the first gay marriage ceremony on television (which he had long supported), and he described how he was shocked by his own homophobic response: 'Two men in tuxedos kissing at the town hall ... it just didn't seem right'. Even when we are part of an activist group that is discriminated against, even when we are aware and supportive of the issues, social norms instilled in us since childhood still inhabit our lives, thoughts and our bodies. We carry around our histories, social class, ethnicity, physical ability/disability, gender, sexuality, and religious beliefs, and we notice difference in others.

Anybody in a leadership position needs to realize that they and their team will be working from a set of assumptions and biases based on personal and group experience and social location. This includes one's physical ability, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, faith, sexuality and class that are inscribed with social meanings. These meanings are enacted by us, and by others who encounter us. Our assumptions from a dominant group get into our culture and behaviours and become 'taken-for-granted' norms'. Butler (2004: 41) points out that norms can be explicit but are usually implicit, 'this is just how things are', and those that deviate from this are made to feel wrong, excluded and imbued with a sense of failure.

Difference, Leadership and Projection

It is not possible to be a leader or follower and work openly with difference unless we can first locate ourselves. Unless we are self-aware, knowing what we are carrying with us and have an awareness of what others may see in us, we will always be 'reactionary'. An emotionally charged reaction to the difference we see in others, and to their reactions to us, results in unconscious discrimination and exclusion taking place. When undertaking diversity training I always begin with an exercise where participants 'locate themselves', identifying their own place and locating myself as an example.

I write as a white, heterosexual, English male. I carry with me the history, social and cultural meanings, stereotypes, power and privileges and disadvantages, associated with this position. I attended a 'working-class' school that offered a very poor education. I dropped out of school and didn't get to university. I accessed higher education in my thirties. This experience gives me a heightened awareness and sensitivity towards issues of class, the elitism of education, and a less personal experience of issues such as disability. When working as Director of Coaching at Lancaster University Management School, taking on a role and the title 'Dr Simon Western', I had a heightened awareness of the powerful unconscious projections I received. These projections towards an 'academic' clashed with the internalized sense of an 'uneducated' self I had grown up with.

These projections arise because of what I represent to others, in my body, personality and university role. Depending on others' personal emotional and developmental histories and social location, will depend on how they respond to me. This is a two-way process, a dynamic that is both conscious and unconscious. I have observed that these projections are triggered through five key sources (see Box 11), which I believe are also applicable to leaders working in other contexts.

