

Conclusion: 'Rainbow-Wash'

When coaching, educating and consulting with senior executives, it has become clear to me that issues regarding empowerment, inclusion and diversity are integral to all the other issues companies face. Yet whilst diversity is highly visible in the corporate and public sector agenda, like those discriminated against, diversity itself gets marginalized from strategic, cultural and policy changes that would really make a difference. When companies talk big but do very little about sustainability, activists and campaigners accuse them of 'greenwash'. I use the term 'rainbow-wash' to describe and challenge companies when diversity and difference are highly visible in the company rhetoric, but very little happens. I apply this to companies that claim to be 'colourful rainbows' filled with diversity, progressive and dynamic, yet in reality are monochrome, bland and monolithic in their attitudes and culture.

A colleague of mine, working in OD and passionate about diversity issues, writes of her experience of working in Canary Wharf:

There has been a lot of effort and focus on diversity policies and metrics in organizations in recent years, but real change is very slow to come. I feel this is because we have been focused on diversity for the sake of diversity, and many simply pay lip service or add it on as an afterthought. We need to look at diversity, not as an end in itself, or as a separate task where the box needs to be ticked. It should be about how we do everything else – hiring, decision-making, leadership – it's an indicator of as well as a precursor to an effective, engaging and fully-functioning organization. (Suchdev, 2011)

The links are clear: the ethical case for diversity and inclusion must drive change or otherwise diversity becomes an afterthought and little changes. Yet those companies who take diversity seriously will also benefit in multiple and often unexpected ways, both directly and indirectly. The task for leaders and organizations is to make inclusion and working with difference a core part of the company culture. When this happens difference itself becomes a strength rather than a problem.

Difference is the underpinning dynamic in the diversity debate: can we tolerate, live with, accept, enjoy 'the other'? Or are we always retreating to homogeneous groups, grasping for familiarity and sameness, saying with those who offer no threat but also little creativity?

In relation to leadership, particular issues arise relating to diversity, such as which social groups can be tolerated as leaders, and how can structural changes be made to prevent elite groups dominating the highest leadership positions in companies?

When working in organizations it is important to address diversity as a part of the whole; for example, when supporting a company making the transition from a command and control hierarchy to a more dispersed leadership. I take the opportunity to ask these questions because in order to distribute leadership as they claim to desire, they have to address these issues:

- Who is sitting at the leadership table and who is absent?
- Who can speak and who can't?
- Whose voices are heard and whose aren't, and why?
- Whose values and interests are being represented?
- Which groups are being marginalized and how does this impact on organizational success?

I coach leaders to observe their meetings, to notice what happens in meetings and within themselves, using questions like these to stimulate awareness of the structural power issues that exist. They often come back to the next coaching session with some powerful insights: 'At the board meeting there were 10 men and 1 woman'; 'We had a meeting and the CEO spoke and the meeting went silent, people listened. When the HR director [a female] spoke people interrupted, went to the restroom, got coffee'; 'We really try hard to be inclusive in this company, but we find at the European-Asian summit it is English and German voices which never shut up. The Asian leaders are much less quick to speak, and they don't often get the opportunity.'

These questions open up the normative and structural issues; they go beyond the content of the meeting and ask the deeper question about power, norms and representation in the organization. As will be addressed later in the Eco-leadership chapter, these questions also go beyond the organization, to the stakeholders, the local community and the ecology and network associated with the organization. Increasingly the task of leaders is to realize that it is not only within the company boundaries that these issues arise, but that they also have to account for supply chains and other stakeholders. The working conditions in which Chinese employees are making Apple products matter, both from an ethical perspective and a brand and business perspective. To deal with difference and diversity is to face oneself, to question who you are, to accept that otherness is not straightforward, that it can be tough and challenge our own personal and social identities. Yet to do so is enriching.

Leadership teams who address diversity issues begin a process that inevitably evokes creativity across the organization. Conformity is born from sameness, and it is from the tensions and beauty of diversity and difference that new thinking and new understandings are born.

