

On the June 16 SIETAR-conference 'Diversity in Leadership. Leadership in Diversity' I introduced a model to describe the characteristics of an organisation in which diversity is naturally stimulated. The model led to discussion, especially with respect to the perceived 'cultural bias' that according to many was included in the model. In this paper I explain some more background and hope to convince you of the need for these attitudes and behaviours in an organisation that stimulates diversity, regardless of culture. Writing this out helps me organize my thoughts. I especially hope this paper will stimulate further discussion.

Diversity

In the context of this paper, I do not specifically refer to a particular type of diversity, such as gender diversity, different age profiles or various flavours of sexual orientation. That's surface: these visible or easily noticeable differences are present, but usually just deal with one particular aspect of diversity ("Does the police force have the right amount of Moroccan women?" etc.) I aim to go beyond this 'surface representation' of diversity, and address deeper differences between humans. The essence of diversity is in the welcoming of differences of any kind, even the deepest differences of religious beliefs, fundamental values and life orientation. In organisations, this manifests as a true welcoming and inviting of different thoughts and attitudes, views and beliefs.

So rather than dealing with diversity in terms of numbers and percentages of minority groups, I assume that in any group – even when the surface representation of that group is very homogeneous – there are many differences in the way people think and act. And I assume these differences to be only bigger when the group is clearly heterogeneous. There is strength in these differences, and a true diverse organisation is able to benefit from that potential.

In organisations – especially in the public sector – there is a need for the organisation to be a true representation of the society (or customer base) they serve. This also is 'surface representation': the percentage of women, blacks and Hispanics should be representative for the amount of people in these categories in society as a whole. But getting the numbers right does not mean that the organisation as such uses the benefits of those (or other) differences.

True diversity of thought yields benefits that go beyond 'having the numbers right'. True diversity is known to lead to enhanced creativity and better (complex) decision-making. And there are many secondary benefits even though scientific evidence for these benefits is thin: a bigger talent pool, higher job satisfaction, higher retention etc.

So how to stimulate diversity?

A diverse organisation is an organisation in which the culture is such that different beliefs, thoughts and opinions are welcomed and stimulated.

Organisations often turn the wrong knobs to stimulate a diverse workforce. Giving an entity high up in the organisation the job to make the organisation more diverse does not help. Your new 'Chief Diversity Officer' will quickly turn into an internal sales person, trying to sell the preach of diversity to groups that have unrelated business objectives. Quickly the Chief Diversity Officer will feel like the CSO or the CEO (Chief Sustainability Officer or Chief Ethics Officer), who try to win the hearts of people for yet another corporate initiative: sustainability or ethics. They fight an uphill battle, winning souls for their initiatives while the organisation has programmed the very same souls to do different things: win new business, invent new products, increase profit margins.

Similarly, the Diversity and Inclusion Department will not be well connected to the rest of the organisation. They have a noble mission and a powerful message, but lack direct impact on the businesses that autonomously make hire/fire decisions and business decisions impacting culture.

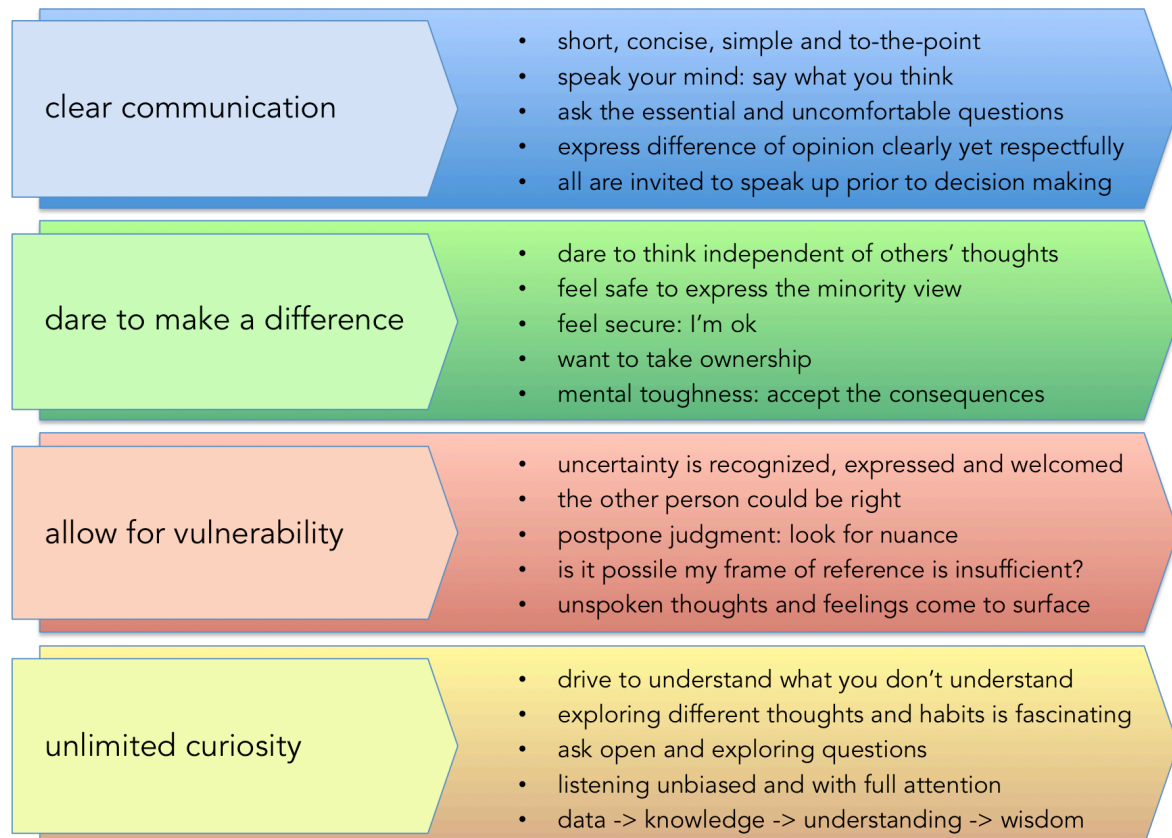
Culture change requires a combined effort: making changes at work-floor level that are supported by the top leaders of the organisation. The culture change involves new attitudes and behaviours that should become natural to all in the organisation. In my experience, culture change should be approached bottom-up. It's the attitudes and behaviours of the workers that make the culture. Culture cannot be designed top-down. Efforts where the top tells the workers to adopt certain attitudes and behaviours fail without exception.

What is needed for an organisation to be diverse?

- The public image/brand of a diverse company, such that minority groups will feel attracted and want to work for this organisation
- The right mix of people ('getting the numbers right') that enter job interviews, so an influx of people such that the composition of the workforce is – or becomes more - diverse
- The right selection criteria for hiring the preferred candidate (filter out unconscious bias, decide on criteria for minority group preferred hiring or not, etc.)
- A culture in which – assuming the differences are there – these differences are welcomed and invited to the table when creativity is needed and decisions need to be made. This requires a culture in which some attitudes and behaviours are stimulated, such that people explore their differences (curiosity), can welcome different views than their own (vulnerability), feel invited to be different (make a difference) and clearly express their differences (clear communication).

The four attitudes/behaviours of a diverse organisation

Only having the right mix of people will not make the organisation more diverse: the culture of the organisation needs to be such that differences get expressed and get heard. This requires a certain mind-set and behaviour that stimulates the expression of diversity of thought within an organisation.



Unlimited Curiosity

A mind-set of Unlimited Curiosity is a deep-felt willingness to understand what you don't understand yet. Curious people get fascinated when they hear something they don't expect, and rather than defend commonly shared knowledge, they investigate the unknown. They have a true drive to understand something that is different. This can be a different orientation to life, a different way of solving problems, or a different opinion that gets expressed. They have intense fun to explore different thoughts and habits, as they realize there is more they don't know than they do know. They see an opportunity to learn in everything they don't yet understand.

In order to understand, they ask open and probing questions (inquiry). Not to prove their own right or to criticize a different point of view, but to challenge their own mind. They want to learn. They then are able to listen unbiased to the answers they get, and embrace the new knowledge. In this process, they temporarily park their own thoughts and feelings, to be truly receptive of new information.

They go beyond gathering data and facts when they try to understand what is different. They critically interpret the data such that it leads to new knowledge and understanding, and this way they contribute to the collective wisdom in the organisation.

Allow for Vulnerability

To make room for new views and opinions, the established knowledge needs to get out of the way. At least temporarily. This requires people to accept that 'they don't know'. In the presence of strong opinions they should be able to still question that opinion, and accept that new insights may force them to change their opinion. The uncertainty that comes with 'not knowing' should not trigger anxiety, but should be welcomed. When confronted with a radical new idea or a totally different opinion, people should be able to seriously consider the option (however ridiculous it sounds at first). This requires people to withhold judgement - at least temporarily - and explore the unknown.

In a world in which we are used to express strong opinions (sometimes in sentences of 140 letters max) in terms of black and white, right or wrong, zero or one, there often is little room for nuance. Exploring nuances however is necessary to understand the big picture.

Large organisations more often than not have a masculine culture in which there is little room for nuance and uncertainty. I do not want to criticize that culture as 'wrong' or 'unwanted', but do recognize that typical masculine behaviours do not contribute to the expression of the diversity present in the organisation. It takes courage and vulnerability for a manager to postpone judgement, and ask herself: "Is it possible that my frame of reference is currently insufficient to understand?"

Dare to Make a Difference

People who have the new ideas and diverse thoughts and opinions should be willing to express these. We too often overlook this aspect of diversity. Many brilliant minds have not been heard because they lacked the self-confidence to express their view. Expressing your view means that you take ownership for it: you stand up for your opinion and accept that this opinion may not be welcomed or shared by others. The little internal voices that say "Who am I to express my opinion?" or "What little do I know?" should be silenced, voices should be raised and words should be chosen such that the message gets heard.

This means people should feel safe to express themselves and make a difference. This is a shared responsibility: the organisation should provide the safety for people to express themselves without negative consequences. The responsibility however goes beyond the organisation: the individual holds the responsibility to express his or her unheard opinion. Sometimes people need help to feel confident to speak up, release their thoughts and accept that they are worth to be heard.

Daring to make a difference also means that you dare to think independently: that you feel secure to form an opinion regardless of the established knowledge, current status quo or conventional wisdom. The bright thinker accepts that the ideas she holds are in need of being heard by others: she takes responsibility to express herself. And if the consequences of speaking up are that you get questioned, put under pressure or criticised, so be it. A healthy dose of mental toughness is needed to (dare to) express your voice and be heard.

Clear Communication

Even when somebody decides to speak up and make a difference, this should be done in such a way that others can understand her. Clear communication is a requirement to explore difference of thought. This means opinions should be expressed with little words, and should be sharply formulated. Clear, concise and to-the-point. Many great ideas get lost in an amorphous blurb of unclear words, or may not be understood because 'slang' was used. Expressing your thoughts, opinions and feelings in a simple way is essential for making your opinion be heard.

It is inevitable that differences of opinion come with friction. Two points of view (two 'truths') collide. Exploring these differences requires that people do not shy away from expressing their – sometimes opposing – views, and ensure that the differences that emerge get explored. This does not mean that conflict should be sought for, but it means that the fear of conflict does not withhold people from having an opinion and expressing it. The uncomfortable questions need to get asked, and the unpleasant feelings of interpersonal disagreement should be accepted in order to communicate openly about differences.

There is no value in diversity if the present differences do not get expressed openly and explored meticulously. And even when our cultural programming tells us expressing difference of opinion under certain circumstances is to be avoided, we should feel confident to overcome our cultural programming occasionally and make ourselves be heard.

Cultural Dependences

The last sentence of the previous section addresses cultural programming. The statement will be controversial to some, and won't be immediately supported by many people in the field of intercultural communication.

Our cultural programming is just that: a programming of the mind, telling us that certain behaviours are ok ("This is the way we do things here") and certain behaviours are not. These learned behaviours define our comfort zone: we have learned that staying within these boundaries leads to acceptance within our culture, and moving ourselves outside these boundaries involves the risk of criticism or rejection.

Not all cultural programming is suitable in all circumstances. Different situations require different responses to be effective. Some of these responses may go against our main cultural programming.

What cultural programming is relevant for the above described 4 behaviours?

I believe the first attitude (unlimited curiosity) deals with a personality characteristic more than with any cultural programming.

The second behaviour however (allow for vulnerability) holds many cultural implications. First of all there is a weak link to the cultural dimension of 'uncertainty avoidance': while some cultures try to avoid uncertainty by rules, processes and other systems, other cultures embrace uncertainty and take a deterministic position: when the unexpected happens, just deal with it as good and flexibly as you can. The uncertainty that comes with 'expressing you don't know' (especially from role-models that are called 'experts') will feel uneasy for some.

Of even bigger relevance is the cultural dimension of masculinity, that is associated with competition, striving to win (an argument) and assertiveness. The behaviours that are described to 'allow for vulnerability' seem more to fit the so-called feminine cultures that are associated with caring, providing safety and seeking nuance.

Also, in very hierarchical cultures the expectation is that those who hold the power know: they set the direction, know what needs to be done and give the orders to which others obey. This division of power is seen as natural. This contrasts with the more egalitarian cultures that are characterised by consensus decision-making, all voices are heard and everybody's opinion counts. In hierarchical cultures the manager is not expected to show vulnerability or express 'she doesn't know'.

The third behaviour (dare to make a difference) deals with the same dimension of power distance: whether you express your thoughts and decide to make a difference depends on your position in the hierarchy, and in high power distance cultures the ones with less power are not expected to take ownership, responsibility and express themselves (at least not in the way we in Western cultures give meaning to 'ownership' and 'responsibility').

Finally, clear communication is defined here as a culture in which disagreements are surfaced, and where people express themselves short and concisely, speaking their mind and asking uncomfortable questions. These habits are characteristic for low-context cultures, in which people use direct communication.

In collectivistic cultures – and even in some individualistic cultures – high-context communication prevails, and negative statements or disagreements are worded in such a way that nobody loses face or feels uncomfortable. This may prevent the open expression of feelings and thoughts – certainly in public – and leads to more careful, less direct communication.

Implication of these Cultural Dependences for Diversity

The above cultural factors may make us decide not to speak up, to express disagreements openly or allow for vulnerability. We have learned that the norm in our culture is to avoid these behaviours. Nevertheless, to be effective in some situations we have to move outside our cultural comfort zone, and use behaviours that are less well known to us. Not because this is better, but because this is more effective in the circumstances we are in.

The Dutch cultural programming is to be direct, voice our opinion and confront others in a direct way when we disagree. Nevertheless, in many circumstances we may not be effective by sticking with this cultural stereotype. When trying to win a large contract with a Japanese multinational you may want to withhold and express your opinion more indirectly in order to be effective. In diplomatic contexts where many parties need to reach agreement about sensitive issues, you may want to express your opinion more diplomatic and less confrontational. You have to adjust to be effective.

The Japanese cultural programming is to choose your words carefully, speak indirectly (high-context) and take into account the hierarchy when deciding to speak up or not. Nevertheless, the Japanese may not always be effective if they would stick to this cultural stereotype all the time. I have witnessed Japanese managers being very direct and confrontational when the situation asked for this. And Japanese employees are able to speak up and make their different opinion be heard, although they do this in a different way than we do in order to be effective.

I believe the same holds for the behaviours that stimulate a diverse organisation: in order to effectively benefit from different opinions and thoughts, people may have to leave their cultural comfort zone and use other behaviours. Not because these are 'better' behaviours, but because they yield better results in some circumstances. This holds especially in multi-cultural environments where many different cultures interact and cooperate. These different sub-cultures don't share the same cultural programming and don't share the same context for their communication. In these situations we need to look for behaviours that are effective for the goals we have.

Conclusion

A diverse organisation requires a set of attitudes and behaviours:

- unlimited curiosity
- allowance of vulnerability
- daring to make a difference, and
- clear communication.

Regardless of the cultural environment we are in, we need these attitudes and behaviours in order to be effective and benefit from the diversity that is present. This may require us to go outside our cultural comfort zone, and adapt behaviours that are less natural to us.