

Culture, What Culture?

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Understanding dominant culture--and its impact--can bolster diversity efforts in your organization.

AT SIXTEEN, I TRAVELED 12,000 MILES AS AN EXCHANGE STUDENT to Sri Lanka--it was about as far as you could travel from North Carolina without coming back the other way. I didn't realize it, but I had been stereotyped as an "American teenager" before I ever arrived. For the people in Pita Kotte--a village full of ox carts and just one phone--that meant I should talk loudly, snap gum, wear excessive blue eye shadow, and shop all the time. And though they got to know me as an individual, not a type, my neighbors there continued to rely on me for information on all things American: "What do Americans value more than anything else?" "What is a typical day for an American?" "What do Americans eat for breakfast?" and "What is the most important rule for living in America?" (My answer to the last one? "Don't break in line.")

That experience provided several a-ha's for me: First, we have to see people as "who's," not "what's," Secondly, I couldn't answer their questions about Americans because I couldn't see American culture from a distance. I was too much in the thick of it, and from that vantage point it was impossible to make generalizations--I knew too much about how complex, diverse, and individualistic American life was. In fact, until then, I had never thought of myself as living in a distinct culture--the way I lived was just the way life was. Wasn't it? Only by seeing it from a distance (and from someone else's perspective) was I able to put my American life into context and see myself as part of a culture--complete with its own norms, values, and behaviors.

Raising that "out-of-awareness" level is the first, most vital step of any diversity undertaking, whether personal or organizational.

Dominant and nondominant cultures

Many of us have traveled abroad and been stereotyped as an "ugly American" though we knew we didn't fit that stereotype. Simply being American puts us in a dominant position in the world, and makes us revered--or feared--by some for that reason. It's an uncomfortable position in which to be. Or if we are right-brained creative types in a left-brained analytical world, we've also felt that discomfort--what we've experienced in both cases is the phenomenon of dominant and nondominant cultures.

"Every dimension of diversity-- whether age, race, gender, management status, education or thinking style-- has a dominant and nondominant side," explains Anita Rowe, partner in the Los Angeles-based Gardenswartz and Rowe and co-author of the award-winning *Managing Diversity: A Complete Desk Reference and Planning Guide* (2nd ed., McGraw Hill, 1998).

"For example, if I'm not in a management position where I have discretionary time and can spend several hours out of the office at lunch, then I feel I'm in a less powerful position. If I'm illiterate in a literate world, I'm in a nondominant position. Or, because most of the world is left brain-dominant, if I'm a right-brained creative type, I'm out of the dominant culture," Rowe says.

Indeed, each one of us has at one time or another experienced being in the nondominant culture. Having that experience is one thing--learning from it is another altogether.

We don't know what we don't know

"If you're a member of a dominant group," says Anita Rowe, "chances are that you don't know it. You don't think of yourself as part of a 'group,' because you are just 'it.' You're just 'normal.'"

"The dominant group always knows less about nondominant groups than the other way around," Rowe explains. "Nondominant groups know more about the dominant group because they have to know more to survive. The dominant group has a huge blind spot when it comes to this, and is really at a disadvantage."

Everyone, as Rowe notes, is dominant in some situations and nondominant in others. In the United States, for example, European-Americans--or whites--are the dominant culture. In the nursing profession, women are the dominant culture. In the firefighting profession, men are the dominant culture. "Everyone is dominant and nondominant in some situations," she says. "You may be a minority in the United States, but being a native English speaker puts you in a dominant culture position. Not being an immigrant also puts you in a dominant culture position. So you can be in dominant and nondominant positions simultaneously."

Out-of-awareness level

According to Milton J. Bennett, co-director of the Portland, Oregon-based Intercultural Communication Institute, it's necessary to first place yourself in context in your own culture before you'll be able to see other cultures clearly.

"The dominant group, whether Han Chinese in China or European-Americans in the United States, tends to neglect their own cultural context," Bennett explains. "We tend not to see our own culture because the dominant group is defined as 'standard.' We don't think we have a culture--this is just the way things are. But the failure to perceive yourself as operating in culture subtly creates the dynamic that you're operating in a standard mode and everyone else is deviant."

"When we're operating in a cultural context and actually see ourselves as operating in a specific culture, then we can begin to see others as variation, not deviation," Bennett says. That's when the "a-ha" begins and diversity work can proceed.

To understand this issue of dominant culture we must first create a boundary so there is differentiation between "us" and "them." "We must clarify the boundaries between our culture and the other, as well as generate contrasts between the values and artifacts of our culture and the other. This illuminates one's own culture in a way that makes it much clearer who the 'us' is about which we're talking," Bennett says.

Danger zone of dominance

"Dominant culture tends to ignore its own cultural context and is unable to recognize its own exercise of dominance. If I'm unable to see myself operating in a culture, I can't see the rules that emerge out of that culture," explains Bennett. For example, organizations in the United States are largely organized around European-American procedures--our ideas about competition, job performance, communication, and decision-making styles are European-American concepts, with

very few exceptions. "Lacking the ability to see myself operating in culture doesn't allow me to see that this has been imposed. Rather, we see these rules as 'natural'--because, we believe, organizations simply work better that way. We're unable to imagine how it might work otherwise," Bennett says.

The implications go much further than rules: "Deep down, what this really means is that we're unable to construe the 'other' as equally human and complex," Bennett warns. And until we can do so, diversity work has no chance of success in our organizations.

Let's be specific

"When people in the dominant culture think of their own ethnicity," says Bennett, "they think of it in ethnically specific terms. I describe myself as having a very specific heritage. That specificity lends a reality to my life that's relatively missing when I refer to a large group as 'Latino' or 'African-American.' The effect is to create inequity, whether consciously or unconsciously."

These kinds of broad categories-- Asian, Latino, African-American-- don't have parallel specificity to terms like Irish-American or German-American, for example. "This provides more complexity and generates a feeling of relative human-ness," says Bennett. "By claiming a heritage and being specific about the place from whence I come, I generate a feeling of relative human-ness. It says, 'I'm more human than you.'"

How to overcome this? "When you refer to ethnicity, refer to it at an equal level," says Bennett. For example, if you refer to Latinos, the parallel reference is to European-American, not to any more specific group. Provide each group about which you're speaking the same level of specificity and complexity. "To achieve conceptual coherence, when talking about race, the parallel construction would be 'black' and 'white.' In talking about ethnicity and its cultural factors, we should talk about 'African-American' and 'European-American,'" he advises.

With dominance comes privilege

"A man probably doesn't recognize that when he walks to his car in a dark parking lot, he needs to keep his keys sticking out from his palm. He just doesn't think about those things," says Rowe. That's one simple example of what Peggy McIntosh calls "privilege," a concept central to our understanding of diversity issues.

In 1986, McIntosh, associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, wrote a paper that has become a classic ("White Privilege and Male Privilege"). In it, she outlined 46 ways she experienced what she called "unearned advantage" from being white. McIntosh realized that racism wasn't just about individual acts of discrimination or violence--rather, she began to realize that racism is a system that conferred privilege on her right from birth.

"I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group," she says. Most of us are unaware of privilege as it operates in our daily lives. See sidebar "White Privilege," for examples that help us understand how insidious--and powerful--privilege is.

McIntosh uncovered a system of privileges that most whites don't ever realize or acknowledge, but that have great bearing on systemic and sometimes unconscious racism in the workplace. "I urge others to investigate their 'white privilege' from their own perspective and life experience,"

she notes. It's not just whites that enjoy these "invisible" privileges. Instead, each dominant group enjoys "privileges" that must be acknowledged for diversity work to be meaningful (see sidebar "Heterosexual Privilege" on page 46). It's important that McIntosh's focus doesn't invoke blame or shame, just awareness--awareness then becomes a tool for altering privilege and exclusion.

What can you do?

To understand dominant culture and privilege--and the impact it has-- requires work. Anita Rowe has these suggestions for association executives who'd like to understand these issues more fully.

* Consistently engage in real conversation and dialogue with someone from a different group from your own. For example, if "English speaker" is one of your dominant cultures, go to lunch with someone for whom English is a second (or third) language. Ask them questions about what it is like to have people react to their accent every day. Try to understand their reality by actively listening to them.

* Put yourself in situations where you're not dominant, where you're a noticeable minority or in a group where you don't know the norms and unspoken rules. Recognize what that feels like and sit with the discomfort. Ask yourself these questions: What did I do to make myself more comfortable? What did I do to be effective or survive in that situation? What did others do that either helped or hindered my effectiveness? What would have helped me in that situation? This learning could be particularly effective as you try to understand how to make nonmembers or inactive members feel more a part of your organization.

* Challenge yourself to see yourself in the opposite situation of which you identify. For example, if you see yourself in the nondominant culture as a woman, in which situations can you see yourself as the dominant culture? Stretch yourself to expand your own self-definition.

* To help you see life from a different perspective, consciously read books or watch movies about groups other than your own.

* In addition, explore your own privileges and the impact those have on the organization and the people in it.

To successfully address diversity issues, it's not enough to develop a vision statement, attend training sessions, and print marketing brochures that show diversity. We must take a viewpoint--from 12,000 miles or simply from someone else's perspective-- that will allow us to see the dominant culture issues at play in our own organizations: How would we describe our culture to an outsider? What are the unwritten rules? Who makes those rules? Can we imagine operating under different rules? How much does dominant culture affect our organization? Do dominant culture issues keep people out who should be included in our association? What privilege do I have as a member of the dominant culture and how does that have an impact on the organization and the people in it?

Only then can we begin to effectively address diversity issues.

END

SIDEBAR

Unconscious Privilege; The White Experience

The following 46 points represent ordinary and daily ways in which Peggy McIntosh, author of "White Privilege and Male Privilege," experiences having white privilege, by contract with her African-American colleagues in the same building.

By acknowledging these unconscious privileges and creating awareness about them within the workplace, diversity work can begin.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be reasonably sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be fairly sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another woman's voice in a group in which she is the only member of her race.
12. I can go into a book shop and count on finding the writing of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable.

14. I could arrange to protect our young children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I did not have to educate our children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern other's attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color,
18. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
22. I can remain oblivious to the languages and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
24. I can be reasonably sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be fairly sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting. even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection of my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative, or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race,
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader. I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all parts of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

SIDEBAR: Unconscious Privilege: The Heterosexual Experience

It is not only whites that enjoy privilege. People in power groups (white, male, nondisabled, and so forth) all have unearned privilege that people in nonpower groups do not have.

1. I can get married with a state recognized marriage license.
2. I can kiss or show affection in public.
3. I don't have to question my normality.
4. I can talk about my relationship(s).
5. I can openly show pain when a relationship ends.
6. I can adopt children without any questions.
7. My own children will not be taken away from me because of my sexual orientation.
8. I can be open about apartment hunting with my significant other.
9. I can be pretty sure of obtaining housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
10. I can be pretty sure that my neighbor will be neutral or pleasant to me.
11. I am validated by my religion.
12. I can feel comfortable at my children's school, with the teachers, and school activities.
13. I can have in-laws.
14. I can dress without having to worry about what it represents.
15. I don't have to hide friends and social activities that are geared toward people like me.
16. I don't resent the heterosexist media or feel excluded.
17. I can share holidays with my lover and families.
18. I can openly discuss politics without fear of someone reading between the lines.
19. I can enjoy family support without question or condition.
20. I can get tax breaks and insurance coverage with my spouse.
21. I can be in the company of people of my sexual orientation most of the time.

22. I can walk alone and be pretty sure I will not be followed or harassed because of my sexual orientation.
23. I do not have to fear violence because of my sexual orientation.
24. I can turn on the television or open the paper and see people of my sexual orientation widely represented.
25. When I am told of our national heritage or about civilization I am shown that people of my sexual orientation helped make it what it is.
26. I can go into a music store or library and find music, books, etc. by people of my sexual orientation instantly.
27. I am never asked to speak for all members of my group.
28. I can easily find posters, postcards, picture books, and greeting cards featuring people of my sexual orientation.
29. I can go home from most meetings feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
30. I don't have to fear losing my job because of my sexual orientation.
31. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my sexual orientation can not get in or will be mistreated.
32. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my sexual orientation will not be held against me.
33. If my day, week, or year is going badly I need not ask of each negative situation whether it has something to do with my sexual orientation.

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