

# The Paradox of Diversity Management, Creativity and Innovation

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This conceptual and discursive paper argues that diversity is a recognizable source of creativity and innovation that can provide a basis for competitive advantage. On the other hand, diversity is also a cause of misunderstanding, suspicion and conflict in the workplace that can result in absenteeism, poor quality, low morale and loss of competitiveness. Firms seeking competitive advantage therefore face a paradoxical situation. If they embrace diversity, they risk workplace conflict, and if they avoid diversity, they risk loss of competitiveness. The advantages and disadvantages associated with workforce diversity put organizations in a position of managing a paradoxical situation. To give support to this assertion, the paper considers what is meant by diversity, how it is best managed, what its relationship with creativity and innovation might be and how the problems created by the management of diversity, creativity and innovation might be resolved.

## Introduction

The paper examines the relationship between diversity, creativity, innovation and competitive advantage in firms that operate within a high-commitment context. High-commitment organizations are those with an approach to human resource management (HRM) that fosters and supports the creation and maintenance of an internal labour market and a high-level skills base. Employees are managed by means of an outcome-driven rather than a process-driven approach. This approach, in turn, is founded on a reliance on employee skills and knowledge, rather than high levels of supervision to ensure required levels of quality and output (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2000; Lepak and Snell, 1999).

Unfortunately, managers operating in a high-commitment context face a dilemma. They can either seek to harness diversity in order to promote creativity and innovation or they can ignore the diversity dimension, within the constraints of the law. If they are successful in embracing diversity, then organizational agility, founded upon creativity and innovation, can ensue (Cox and Blake, 1991).

Organizations that adopt a high-commitment orientation are confronted by a number of challenges. Because their approach to HRM relies on low staff turnover and retention of scarce skills, they may find it difficult to create

a diverse workforce, preferring as they do, the conflict-reducing influence of homogeneity.

While much of the argument presented here can be applied to all organizations, it is high-commitment organizations that are the paper's focus, because the issues raised are especially evident in these firms.

The paper begins by defining diversity and diversity management. It then explores the genesis of diversity as a management concept, before going on to consider the complex interrelationship between diversity, creativity, innovation and competitive advantage, suggesting that creativity is a precondition for innovation, and that creativity and innovation are enhanced by the existence of diversity. This discussion leads to a consideration of the issue of managing diversity. Then HRM appropriate for diversity management is discussed. The final section makes the case for embracing diversity management sooner rather than later, particularly in high-commitment organizations.

## Definitions of Diversity and Diversity Management

For the purposes of this paper's argument, the term 'diversity' encompasses a range of differences in ethnicity/nationality, gender, function, ability, language, religion, lifestyle or

tenure (Kossek & Lobel, 1996). Additionally, 'diversity' in the workplace includes more than employees' diverse demographic backgrounds, and takes in differences in culture and intellectual capability. It takes more than demographic or ethnic diversity to result in creativity that leads companies to perform better (Leonard & Swapp, 1999).

The term 'diversity management' refers to the systematic and planned commitment on the part of organizations to recruit and retain employees with diverse backgrounds and abilities. It is an activity that is mainly to be found within the HRM training and development domains of organisations (Betters-Reed & Moore, 1992; Thomas, 1992). In the context of this paper, diversity management is defined as the aggregate effect of HRM sub-systems, including recruitment, reward, performance appraisal, employee development and individual managerial behaviours in delivering competitive advantage through leadership and team work.

### The Genesis of Diversity as a Management Concept

It is worth noting that while the notion of managing diversity has evolved out of social policies designed to promote equality, and that while, historically, these policies in both the UK and the USA have been focused on delivering equality of access to opportunity for disadvantaged social groups, the approach and the agenda in each national context has been different.

In the USA, policy has tended to be driven by a commitment to 'affirmative action'. In the UK, however, affirmative action has, to date, been perceived as positive discrimination, and has been effectively proscribed by law.

To understand some of the dynamics that gave rise to this divergence, it is necessary to review the demographic patterns of the two countries. America was first alerted to impending changes in the demographic composition of its labour market in a report entitled *Workforce 2000* (Johnston & Packard, 1987). In the flurry of interest that followed, a range of data pointed to the extent to which the American economy was changing (Latimer, 1998; Watson, 1996). The United Kingdom is different. Whereas in America, ethnic minority populations accounted for 26% of the total, in the UK, it was 5.5%.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that equality of opportunity was perceived as an issue of greater political urgency and social consequence in the USA. Opinion differs on why diversity management emerged in the way

that it did. Kirton and Greene (2000) and Kossek and Lobel (1996) have suggested that the diversity paradigm evolved because it was perceived to be less threatening and controversial than affirmative action driven by notions of equality of opportunity. Writers like Yakura (1996) have asserted that diversity management was an attempt to enlist the support of disenchanted white males. Others, such as Prasad et al. (1997), have suggested that the diversity approach, with its emphasis on corporate initiative and human capital theories, resonated more harmoniously with American individualism than state intervention imposed through policies of equality of opportunity.

Moreover, whilst the USA and the UK are in the vanguard when it comes to recognizing that diversity constitutes a major management challenge, commentators have noted that other Western economies are confronted by dramatic shifts in their demographic balance that will push the effective management of diversity up the management agenda. The United Nations projects that the European population could shrink by as much as 94 million or 13% by 2050 and that, amongst the G8, only the USA, Canada and the UK will have growing populations. By 2020, it is estimated that the world's population will consist of more than 1,000 million people aged 60 and older.

Governmental and organizational responses to these challenges might include importing young skilled labour from those regions of the world that are well-endowed with skilled and educated young people, and the development of social policies and taxation regimes that encourage child-rearing and the retention of the skills of older workers for longer. Organizations with a high-commitment strategy and a largely homogeneous workforce may well find that low staff turnover fosters cultural inertia and inhibits the creation of diversity.

HRM sub-systems define the limits of managerial discretion in managing what can be termed the spectrum of diversity. It is the aggregate effect of the attitudes, skills and behaviours of individual managers that determines the extent to which organizations are able to sustain high commitment within a diverse workforce.

### The Interrelationship of Diversity, Creativity, Innovation and Competitive Advantage

The recognition of the relationships between diversity, creativity, innovation and competitive advantage has stimulated both academics

and the business community to search for factors and situations that give rise to creativity in individuals, and for the catalysts of creativity in teams (West & Anderson, 1996).

Creativity is a necessary precondition for successful innovation. King and Anderson (1995) highlighted the problematic nature of defining creativity. The growth of interest in the field has been accompanied by a proliferation of definitions that have polarized around four themes: the creative person, creative process, creative product and the creative environment (Isaksen et al., 2000).

It is difficult to separate process from product because products can be intangible, and processes often result in the creation of product. There is, however, considerable consensus around what constitutes a creative product. King and Anderson (1995) define its key characteristic as novelty, i.e. the conception must differ significantly from what has gone before. It should also be appropriate to the situation it was created to address, be public in its effect and deliver a perceived benefit. Competitive advantage is as much about incremental system and process innovation, therefore, as it is about radical product innovation.

The link between innovation and competitive advantage has long been understood. Interest in the field was first given impetus by researchers like Abernathy and Utterback (1978). They demonstrated that industry outsiders usually adopted radical innovation as a strategy for overcoming barriers to entry. In so doing, they created a situation in which the dominance of particular players, either within an area of the industry or across the industry as whole, began to lose their hegemony because of an inability to innovate quickly enough to respond to the competitive challenge. In the ensuing confusion, many of the established players found themselves too psychologically and financially committed to the preservation of the *status quo* to embrace change.

Whilst innovation in the West has tended to be defined in terms of breakthrough technologies and products, the *kaizen* philosophy encouraged Japanese manufacturers to think more broadly and to devise strategies for promoting involvement, not only across the organization, but also across the supply chain.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Western organizations came to recognize that industry leadership through radical innovation was being ceded to fast-followers, skilled in reverse engineering and cost reduction through process improvement. Their response was to promote greater involvement from their people through the application of

HRM as a device for improving systems and driving down costs. At the same time, Hamel and Prahalad (1994) provided considerable impetus to the resource-based view of the firm by demonstrating that Japanese corporations sought to sustain their leadership position by forging and exploiting strategic alliances.

Both of these responses can be seen as strategic moves towards the management of diversity. In the case of the Western corporation, Japanese techniques for the management of functional diversity, such as quality function deployment, were embraced, whilst Japanese corporations used strategic alliances to infuse new ideas and know-how into their culturally homogeneous corporations.

There is conflicting evidence as to the extent to which diversity can deliver competitive advantage. On the one hand, exponents of the information decision approach (for example, Cox and Blake, 1991; Iles & Hayers, 1997; Richard & Shelor, 2002) argue that when diversity is managed well, it can enhance creativity, resulting in increased commitment, job satisfaction and a better interface with the market place. In contrast, advocates of social identity theory (for example, Ely and Thomas, 2001; Ibaarra, 1993; Kanter, 1977; Tajfel, 1982) are more pessimistic. They argue that diversity damages cohesiveness, reduces communication and produces in-groups and out-groups. This results in discord, distrust, poor quality and lack of customer focus and market orientation.

If innovation results in a product, system or process that is new to a context, and delivers a definable benefit to a social constituency, then the antecedent lies in the creativity of individuals, whether working independently or in teams. Cummings (1998) has shown that the delivery of a successful innovation involves three stages – conception (which includes creativity), successful development and successful application.

The closer the concept comes to the marketplace, however, the greater the number of people involved. This results in the emergence of two distinct types of challenge – technical and human. Technical problems require the creative energy of teams, whilst human problems arise because of the need to promote diffusion and buy-in to the new idea, initially across the organization and sometimes across the supply chain.

Diversity, combined with an understanding of individual strengths and weaknesses, and working relationships that are founded upon sensitivity and trust, have been shown to enhance creativity and problem-solving capability (Hennessey & Amabile, 1998). Indeed,

Isaksen and Lauer (2002) identified key factors that contribute to creativity and provide a collaborative climate. These are trust, team spirit, unified commitment, principled leadership, an elevating goal, a results-driven structure, standards of excellence, participation in decision-making, external support and recognition, and an aptitude to adjust roles and behaviours to accommodate new emergent values.

Employees either work in teams, defined by Katzenbach and Smith (1993) as 'people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach, for which they hold themselves mutually accountable', or they work in groups. The latter are differentiated as 'people working together who are not as coherent or purposive as team members'. Teams are composed of individuals who have the ability to recognize the personal strengths and limitations of their colleagues. They adjust their behaviours so as to respond to the needs of their peers. These patterns of mutual adjustment result in reduced levels of interpersonal tension and conflict. It falls to the HRM function to promote significant investment in developing managers and encouraging them to accept the emotional labour inherent in managing diversity within the organization (Ruscio et al., 1995).

## Managing Diversity

The literature on diversity highlights a range of responses to the challenge of diversity management. Dass and Parker (1999) identified no fewer than twelve strategic responses to the challenge of managing diversity. Moore (1999) reduced the number of behavioural stereotypes to four – the diversity hostile, the diversity blind, the diversity naïve and the diversity integrationist. Whilst the first three behavioural stereotypes fail to recognize that different management skill sets are required to respond effectively to different diversity challenges, the fourth stereotype is proactive in its approach. Moore's stereotypes recognize that neither functional nor cultural diversity automatically leads to positive or negative outcomes. However, different patterns of diversity present different managerial challenges, to which some organizations respond, whilst others do not.

Thomas and Ely (1996) showed that cognitive and experiential diversity adds to the perspectives available to the organization and encourages clarification, organization and combination of new approaches for the accomplishing of goals. Similarly, Donnellon (1993)

and Tushman (1997) found that work units characterized by diversity have the capability to access broader networks of contacts. This enables them to acquire new information that informs decisions, increases commitment to choices and enhances responsiveness to environmental turbulence.

Latimer (1998) argued that diversity in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, personality and educational background promotes creativity and problem-solving capability. He suggests that groups have been found to be less risk averse than an individual's 'risky shift'. Increased diversity leads to lower levels of risk aversion and better decision-making and problem-solving capability. This arises because diversity promotes a more robust critical evaluation of the first solution to receive substantial support.

One of the objections to diversity is that it damages cohesiveness. Cohesiveness, however, makes groups vulnerable to 'group think'. Diversity acts as an impediment to this phenomenon. Conflict is perceived to damage cohesiveness; however, when it is effectively channelled, it can lead to improved creative problem-solving and decision-making, because the diversity of perspective generates more alternatives and greater critical evaluation.

Results pointing to 'value in diversity' have been countered by theorists who have shown that heterogeneous groups experience more conflict, higher turnover, less social integration and more problems with communication than their homogeneous counterparts (Knight et al., 1999; O'Reilly et al., 1989; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Other studies have suggested lower levels of attachment to employing organizations on the part of individuals who perceive themselves to be different from their co-workers (Mighty, 1997; Tsui et al., 1992). These studies give a clear indication of the nature of the challenge confronting those seeking to promote commitment amongst diverse work groups.

## Appropriate HRM for Diversity Management

High-commitment organizations will tend to prefer an outcome-driven approach to managing people. The required levels of quality and output are seen to result from employee skills and knowledge, rather than high levels of supervision.

Suitable conditions to promote creativity and innovation in diverse contexts are associated with the management of work routines, and the creation of appropriate teams. Indeed,



currently, an increasing amount of work within an organization is accomplished through groups or teams, rather than by individual action.

When selecting individuals to join a team, it helps if managers not only consider functional competence, but also the preferences that people have for different types of work and different types of work context. The ways in which individuals like to work, and the activities within their job roles that give them greatest satisfaction, will shape the way in which they choose to discharge their responsibilities, working individually or in teams.

These manifestations of personal style are important in a team context. Individuals with similar styles may well establish trust early; their homogeneity of approach, however, may become a significant blind spot. In building a high performance team, there is not only a need to match functional competence and personality against the requirements of the job, there is also a need to produce a balance of work preferences, attitude to risk and an inclusive orientation to social identity. In high-commitment team contexts, a strong case can be made for blind selection to the shortlist stage, based on a minimum threshold of functional competence and the results of a range of personality and work preference measures that are blind to age, ethnicity and gender, and that are designed to ensure balance and diversity within the team.

Garvin (1998) has shown how functional diversity gives rise to a potential conflict. He observed that those versed in a particular discipline or function, perceive and define quality in different ways. To those tasked with procurement of resources, quality is perceived to be value for money. Those involved in design see it as intangible and transcendent. Those working in production define it as conforming to requirements. Marketers suggest that it is relative perceived value, whilst sales people argue that quality is for the customer to define. Historically, these tensions produced compartmentalized management practices, because of an absence of tools to reconcile differences of perspective.

Teams with diverse membership and a collectivist orientation are likely to have a deeper well of resource upon which to draw when generating ideas, combining them and subjecting them to critical evaluation. The likelihood of adopting a sub-optimal trajectory, therefore is reduced, especially if the team's approach to systematizing creativity and problem solving is highly developed.

Whilst early success and recognition help to cement a sense of identity and belonging, people and processes need to be supported by a

set of HRM sub-systems that focus on constantly reinforcing these processes. The literature suggests that the greater the diversity, the greater the collectivist orientation needs to be. Systems like the Kaplan and Norton's balanced scorecard (1996) and 360-degree feedback, when combined with reward systems that empower managers to implement employee ideas on their own initiative, help create the supportive infrastructure necessary to deliver results.

## Concluding Remarks

In the context of this paper, diversity management is defined as the aggregate effect of HRM sub-systems, including recruitment, reward, performance appraisal, employee development and individual managerial behaviours in delivering competitive advantage through leadership and team work.

The combustible cocktail of creative tension that is inherent in diverse organizational contexts must be contained within a multilayered vessel. The outer layer must be composed of carefully crafted HRM sub-systems that are both vertically integrated with the business objectives and horizontally integrated one with another (Bamburgh & Meshoulam, 2000). The inner layer consists of effective leadership, which can only be provided by suitably trained managers. They need to understand the challenges of diversity management, and to have the emotional intelligence and commitment necessary to build a personal relationship with each individual, or group/team member.

In support of the view that the existence of diversity in a firm can lead to competitive advantage, the paper considered questions such as 'What is meant by diversity?' 'How is it managed, especially from an HRM point of view?' 'What is its relationship with creativity and innovation?'

It has been argued that embracing diversity management is a risky business. Organizations that embrace high-commitment HRM strategies do so because the systems and processes through which they add value are too complex for managers to control directly through supervision. Instead, they adopt an output orientation. This approach demands that they delegate authority to individuals and teams to make operational decisions. Organizations that adopt an output orientation need innovation and continuous improvement in both products and processes to support a strategy for delivering high-perceived value to the customer. Diversity facilitates the process when managed well.

Unfortunately, there is a paradox. Organizations with an internal orientation to the labour market measure the success of their approach to HRM through high retention rates, low employee voice and a willingness to go beyond contract. This militates against diversity, unless senior managers are highly diversity sensitive and are prepared to put in place HRM sub-systems that support diversity.

Whilst the risks associated with strategies that embrace homogeneity and heterogeneity are different, this paper has questioned whether organizations seeking an innovation advantage really have a choice. This rather deterministic position is predicated on the view that the combination of demographic trends, legislative pressure and market forces in respect of competition for scarce skills will render the barriers to entry for minority groups more permeable. If this view is correct, then in the long term, the need to manage diversity will become unavoidable. In this event, organizations that have adopted high-commitment HR strategies will not be asking whether they should embrace diversity, but rather, how it can best be done.

The challenge that confronts the pioneers is how to achieve the transition. What this paper has sought to show is that it is possible to capitalize on lessons already learned in managing functional diversity – although this is only one of the many types of diversity to be found within firms. We have seen that a number of tools already exist. These will require further development. Others must be added. The shift that has already taken place from the low-trust, functionally divided organization to team-based, interdepartmental working that presaged the quality revolution, offers us a template for managing the transition.

High-commitment organizations that start early can develop an advantage. If they are to succeed, they must demonstrate a commitment to deploying HRM strategies that are designed to foster trust and inclusiveness through effective leadership, on the one hand, with creativity and innovation techniques that capitalize on diversity to deliver an innovation advantage on the other.

In this connection, the literature suggests that the old adage that there can be no gain without pain, is true. However, it is almost certainly better to experience growing pain, than the pain associated with loss of competitiveness and decline arising from an inability to adapt quickly enough to changing conditions. In short, in a high-commitment context, managers are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

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