

WHITEPAPER

What is Diversity?

by Joe Gerstandt

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Still quite possibly the most poorly understood, misunderstood dynamic in the world of business (and education, politics, human resources, leadership development, etc.).

Diversity means difference. Difference shows up in many different forms...but before we even take a look at that, I think having a better understanding of what difference actually means can be helpful. Here are some of what I consider to be the fundamental characteristics of difference:

Diversity is RELATIONAL

Diversity (difference) is relational in nature... if someone is "different", they have to be different from someone or something. Relationship is inherent. Diversity is an attribute of relationships...all relationships...there is diversity in every single relationship / interaction / transaction you have with another human being. There is no such thing as a "diverse person", diversity exists between people not in them. This is but one of the reasons why the diversity vs. talent conversation is almost always fundamentally misinformed. One is an individual attribute and the other is a social attribute.

"Be good to each other." -- Joe Gerstandt

Diversity is PARADOXICAL

There is a paradoxical nature to our social identities that carries over to diversity as well.

- On one level we are each completely unique and unlike everyone else on the planet.
- On another level, there are groups of people that we have a great deal in common with. Social groups (race, age, gender, profession, geography, parental status, military experience) all have some shared culture, language and norms.
- On yet another level we are all alike. We are all human beings spinning through space on a giant rock and at the end of the day we all want the same basic things. Regardless of age, religion, geography, culture, language, etc., we want the same basic things from life.

So diversity is paradoxical to some degree, as I believe all the really important stuff is. We are all different, we are like some and we are all alike...these are all true.

Diversity is CONTEXTUAL

Diversity is a very contextual thing. For starters, we are, as individuals much more contextual, fluid and dynamic than we tend to think. I am a slightly different person on Monday morning than I am on Friday afternoon. I am a slightly different person at work than I am at home. I am a slightly different person in my relationship with my daughters than I am in my relationship with my mother. In each of these settings I am a slightly different version of Joe and I contribute and share different aspects of myself. Not only are we as individuals very contextual, but the aspects of our identities are contextual also. There are a lot of things, stories, issues, etc. within the categories of race, gender, faith, sexual orientation. We must take great care to not overlook the width and depth of human experience and perspective. There is, for example, no one single woman's experience in this country...there is some commonality there for sure, but the experience has to some degree been different for every single member of that group.

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Diversity is GENERATIVE

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About the Author

Joe Gerstandt works with Fortune 500 corporations, small non-profits, and everything in between. He also speaks at numerous conferences and summits each year, blogs at joegerstandt.com and serves on the Board of Directors for the Global Diversity and Inclusion Foundation. Joe designs and delivers relevant, actionable and impactful sessions for client organizations, delivers powerful keynote messages and workshops, guest lectures at colleges and universities and travels the world spreading the good word.

You can find out more about Joe here:

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