ALLIANCES ACROSS DIFFERENCE:
Useful strategies for building effective relationships across difference
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March, 2015

Most of us would like to believe that simply bringing diverse groups together would yield the requisite return on investment that a rich mix of background and experience presents. However, the simplistic notion that people inherently fall into healthy cross-cultural dynamics when difference is present can be put into the category of other mainstream American cultural myths. It just doesn't happen like that.

After 15 years of experience facilitating diversity and inclusion interventions across sectors, industries, and geographies I have noticed patterns of experience that show up in most interactions in diverse systems. In all cultures there are certain power dynamics at play that layer on a level of complexity. Without specific awareness and skillsets these dynamics can easily interrupt productivity, morale, and overall attainment of results. In this article, I offer examples and suggestions for consideration when engaging across social identity groups, especially when group-level power dynamics are at play. It should be noted that there are no cut and dry or fixed solutions when it comes to this work and there is no substitute for learning by doing. The suggestions included are just that...ideas to consider when navigating the vibrant and turbulent seas of human difference. Although written with an audience of leaders in mind, the content applies universally across role, level, function, etc. My hope is to provide food for thought for those actively and intentionally engaging diversity and inclusion in any system.

LEVELS OF DIVERSITY AND POWER DYNAMICS

Over the past 40 plus years there are many ways diversity and inclusion literature has presented frameworks for understanding the dynamics at play when power and culture merge. The following is a distillation of a few of these frameworks that, in my work, has proved a helpful foundational blueprint on which to map dynamics of difference.

Levels of Human Identity

Consider the following dialogue:

Amy: "I don't see difference. I'm color blind."
Daniela: "Well if you don't see difference, you don't see me."

Amy: "I see you, but I think we are all the same, universally connected, and I choose not to see difference. Even talking about our differences separates us more."
Daniela: "You aren't honoring my experience when you say things like that."

Have you ever been a part of or witnessed a conversation similar to the one above? It is a common discourse often leading to a conflict that is difficult to unravel once it ensues. It is indicative of one of the main ways we "miss each other" when we engage in conversations across difference. As many authors and consultants such as Jamison (2004) and Young (2006) suggest, at any given point, we have a framework - or multiple ones - with which we see human identity and differences. The miscommunication illustrated above often stems from our need to make one framework right and all others wrong. The ability to hold multiple frames and perspectives as valid is one of the key strengths to effectively communicating with those who are different from us. The shift from "either/or" to both/and" is so very critical in this work. The speakers in the dialogue above are both right from their particular perspectives. They are in conflict because they are speaking from different levels. Let's look at 3 levels of human diversity that people tend to use to frame their perspective (individual level, universal human level, and social group identity level – See Figure 1 for a visual representation.)

At the **individual** level we are all completely unique and like no other person. We have individual personality quirks, ways of thinking, and a mix of experiences that are like no other person on this earth. Even twin studies have shown DNA to be slightly different between people who, by all accounts, look identical. Many people choose to focus only on this level of system when it comes to issues of difference. You may hear them say things like "We are all different and have the ability to make a unique mark on the world" or "Don't lump me in with other people, I am different from everyone else." In some ways, this is absolutely true. However, if this is the only lens we bring to the work of diversity and inclusion, we end up missing other people's experiences and perspectives, and the ways in which our group memberships create very different experiences due to the power differences between groups.

At the **universal human** level we are all the same. We all bleed and breathe, need food and water, and social interaction, etc. There are many who choose to see human difference through this lens and it is an affront to them to even discuss the ways we are different. The underlying belief for many who see the world through this lens is that we create problems by separating and labeling ourselves as different. Often, the answer, for people who hold this belief, is to concentrate on our similarities and ways we connect around "sameness." The intent is good (as was Amy's in the dialogue above). It is about wanting to connect with others. And essentially, this is the ultimate goal of most diversity and inclusion work – to connect with human beings across boundaries. However, similar to a singular focus on the individual level, the trap when we see things through only the universal human lens is that we miss the very palpable experiences that have to do with people's membership in groups. We also miss the ways our own group memberships influence our lives and can unintentionally cause mismatch between our intent and our impact with those who have a different frame. Ironically, we must understand and honor

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the different experiences and frames of others to get to the experience of universal connection we are seeking.

At the level of **social group identity** (i.e., age, ability, gender, culture, class, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.) we are like some people and unlike others. We share experiences, socialization, societal privilege or disadvantage with those in the same social identity group and we differ in our experiences from those in an identity group we don't share. For example, as a multiracial person I share patterns of experience with other multiracial people. I do not share the experience of identifying with one race as do those
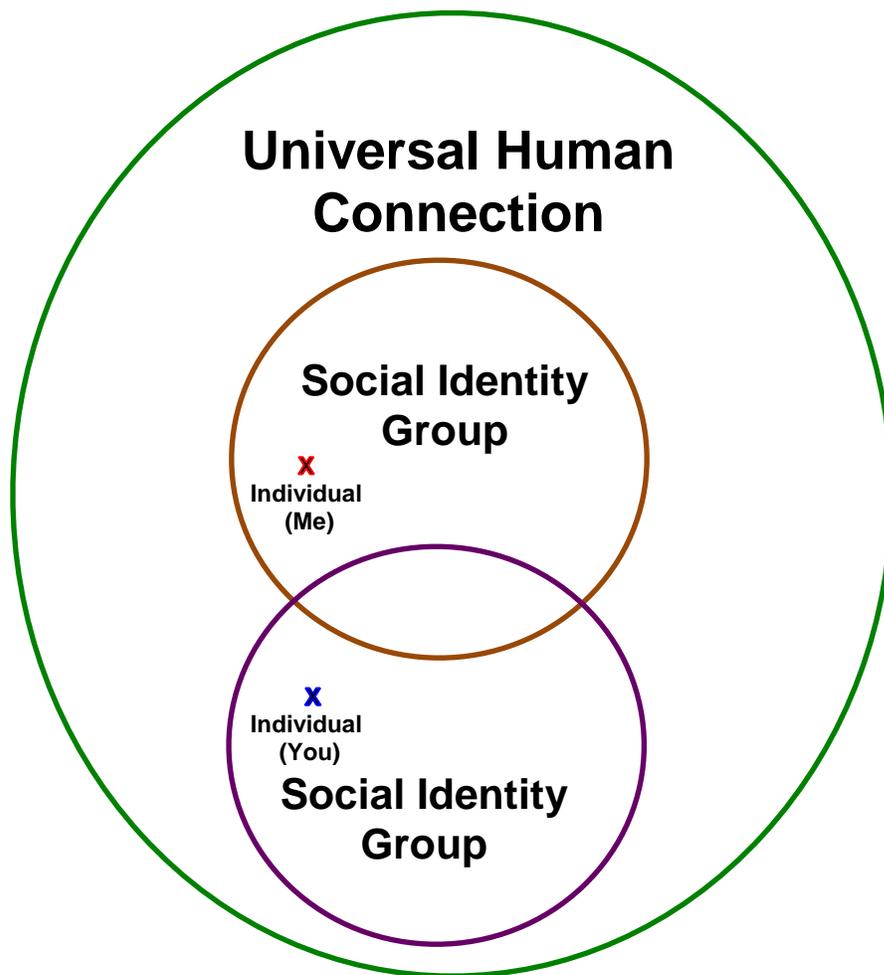

Figure 1. **Levels of Human Diversity**

who identify mono-racially. The cumulative experiences we have based on our social group identities can become very important to our identity, and when they are denied or ignored it is hurtful (as it was for Daniela in the dialogue above). Thus, it is very important to focus on this level. However, as is the case at the other levels, it can be

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problematic in communication when we solely focus on group identity. In the example I just used, if I am over-focused on the common group-level experience I share with other multiracial people, I may miss the ways other individuals experience being multiracial. I may also focus so much on my group identity that I miss the ways I can connect and have similarities with those with different racial identities.

In practice, realizing the frame you are bringing to a conversation while understanding and honoring the frame of another person is the first step toward effective communication across difference. When we can meet each other at the same level (individual, social group identity, universal human) we are much more likely to fully hear each other. For example, if a person who is from India says to me, "I am experiencing a lot of cultural bias against me as someone from India living in the US" (social group identity level), it is important for me to honor this experience and attempt to understand it even though I have a very different experience as a person born in the US. If I say – "Oh, I'm sure you are just sensitive to your difference, why don't you try harder with people? (individual level), or "Maybe you are over-focusing on your culture. We are all the same. Your problem might be that you aren't focusing on similarity," (universal human level) the impact will most likely be negative and result in misunderstanding and disconnection. If I instead ask questions to better understand what it is like for them as a person from India living in the US, meet them where they are, and take the step to understand how my experience is different as someone born in the US (social group identity level), I am more likely to create a context for understanding, connection and learning.

Societal Power and Group Dynamics
When I am hired to do diversity and inclusion work in organizations, it is usually when people have found themselves in the midst of intractable conflict. The difficulty is almost always a breakdown at the social group identity level. Hardiman & Jackson (1997) have illustrated the significance of group identity as it relates to interpersonal relations in some depth. Most of us (especially in the US context) are not trained early on in life to focus on social identity groups. This is a big part of why it becomes so problematic for us to effectively engage conflict at this level when it emerges. For this reason I will focus our attention at the social group identity level for the remainder of this article.

No two social identities are the same. However, there are patterns of experience between groups that can help us understand some of the predictable dynamics that play out. There are distinct differences between the common experiences of groups that have greater social power and those who have lesser social power. For purposes of identifying the power dynamics, I will refer to those groups that garner more social power as "dominant groups" and those who have less power as "marginalized groups." Many have written about these dynamics using varied vocabulary (See, for example, Brazzel, 2007, and Kirkham, 1990). Regardless of the language used to describe these dynamics, most writers will agree that the majority of the conflict that happens across the lines of group identity has to do with the differential societal power afforded groups.

Some of the following patterns tend to be true when we are in a DOMINANT GROUP:

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- We are given access to resources, services, privileges solely based on our group membership.
- We are seen as "normal."
- We "fit in."
- We do not see our "group-ness."
- We tend to focus on our individual intent when a conflict emerges across difference.

When in a MARGINALIZED GROUP we tend to experience the following:
- We have to actively work to gain access to resources, services, privileges because they are not automatically afforded to us (and are often denied) based on our group membership.
- We are seen as "other" or "different."
- If we want access to power, we have often have to work to "fit in" or assimilate.
- We experience ourselves as members of a social identity group.
- We tend to focus on the cumulative impact (on us) of experiences across difference.

It is important to note that we are all members of dominant and marginalized groups. For example, I am middle/upper class, fair skinned, ivy-league educated, heterosexual, and not living with any disabilities. These are all dominant groups. I am also a person of color and a woman. These are marginalized groups. I hold membership in these groups at all times and they often intersect in terms of my experiences in society. For example, as a woman of color I have different patterns of experience than do white women.

Because the often unspoken social group identity dynamics we experience are commonly the culprit when it comes to conflict across difference, when we notice, attend to them, and are able to discuss them openly we are much more likely to communicate effectively. Along these lines, I offer a few suggestions in the next section for each of us to keep in mind.

COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS:

What follows are recommendations for behavioral choices when communicating across dominant and marginalized group identities. They are built from 15 years of anecdotal data-gathering of effective (and ineffective) interactions across difference in organizational settings across industries and sectors. Because the considerations we take into account when communicating depend on whether we are in the dominant or marginalized group, the suggestions are broken up into two sections.

Dominant Group Member Considerations When Interacting with Marginalized Group Members:

Try not to make the difference the only thing to which you respond. When you address someone who is different from you, it is easy to make the difference the only thing to which you respond. When you are initially building a relationship across dominant and

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marginalized group identities, make sure the other person knows you are communicating with them as a human being, not an objectified, different "other." Marginalized group members are usually very used to people responding to their group membership rather than being interested in them as multifaceted human beings. They are often wary of being objectified or tokenized based on their "difference." Thus, as dominant group members seeking connection with marginalized group members, it is important to be authentically interested in who a person is, not just the group he or she represents.

Leverage allies in your group. In dominant groups, the best leverage for change can be found within yourself and others within your identity group. Do your own personal work to identify your blind spots – what are your stereotypes, biases and needs for attitude change that will get in the way of authentic interaction across groups? When looking to use your privilege for lasting change, enlist others in your dominant group to make changes at all levels of the system that will create a more inclusive, equitable culture for all groups.

Help in helpful ways. Being an ally across difference is most effective when it is done out of a sincere interest in creating an equitable culture, not out of a self-interested ego need to be seen as helpful (e.g., the "I'm the good white person" motivation). Reaching out to individuals who feel excluded can be very supportive, but looking for ways to influence the system so the "playing field" is more level is much more effective in changing the power dynamics. Individuals in marginalized groups are not needy. They are simply surviving in a system that does not allow them equal access to basic rights, goods, services, and dignities.

Do not be surprised if individuals from marginalized groups do not want your help or if you get a negative response to your gestures of support. Just as you have learned stereotypes about them, they have learned from a cumulative impact of cultural, historical patterns of oppression. It may take a while for individuals within a marginalized group membership to trust you.

When entering a culture that has a history of being disenfranchised, listen and learn from them before deciding you know what is needed. Ask them what they are interested in and how you might support them in getting what they need done. Take their lead and partner with their leadership to make change.

Beware of the temptation to rely on one individual from a marginalized group to educate you about their group. Not only are they not the spokesperson for every person in their group, but they have most likely been consistently and repeatedly interrogated about their group and been expected to educate dominant group members.

Know diverse historical context. Read about groups that are different from yours. Seek to understand the differences that are between you and the dynamics that have been set up due to historical events. Get interested in cultures different from yours and seek education from multiple sources (books, magazines, articles, friendships, and work partnerships with people from different groups).

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Build and nurture long-lasting friendships and work partnerships with many people who are different from you. The best way to learn about difference is to build relationships with multiple individuals who are different from you. Do the work to stay in relationship with others across difference. The more experience you have with groups of people that are different from you, the more you will develop the awareness, skills, and knowledge to build effective alliances. Once you have the foundation of trust and respect, you have a container within which to discuss and learn from the difference.

Do your best to take things seriously but not personally.
The most painful moments in conflicts across difference almost always stem from taking a personal affront to another person's point of view. It is critically important that we learn to take responsibility for our actions without internalizing blame and shame. For dominant group members, this often comes in the form of letting go of feelings of guilt for having privilege. In most cases we are afforded privilege based on being a member of the group. We didn't ask for it, but we do have it. This does not make us bad and wrong. So guilt becomes useless. Our work is to recognize the feelings we have when we become aware and move toward finding ways to use our privilege effectively.

Marginalized group considerations:

Establish your own support group and coping mechanisms for dealing with oppression. It is important to have allies in your own group and in the dominant group who are doing their own personal work and understand where you are coming from. Marginalized group members need a way to express their anger, pain, and struggle with the experiences of being marginalized.

When engaging dominant group members about power dynamics, do so in ways that encourage them to manage their defensiveness. Dominant group members will often get defensive and stuck in their guilt when confronted with the privilege they have. Ways to manage this include relating to their marginalized group memberships (i.e., a white man may be marginalized in his religion, physical ability, socioeconomic status, position in his organization, etc.). Relating to dominant group members' experiences in their marginalized groups is a good way to establish empathy and understanding.

Dominant group members often miss the fact that they have a group. Because privilege has been granted to them from the day they were born, it is often very difficult to see and because they are a part of a mainstream culture, their "group" can be invisible to them (i.e., how often do people without disabilities think of themselves as members of the "able bodied" group and appreciate the many privileges that affords them?). Assisting individuals in dominant groups in being effective allies often starts with helping them see and acknowledge their group membership.

Relate to individuals in the dominant group by connecting with what is important to them. The dynamics of power can cause us to forget that each individual in a dominant group has individual interests and experiences to which we can relate. Connect and build

relationships based on human interests, not just based on the difference and remember that individuals hold group memberships, but are not necessarily representative of every person in their group (i.e., not all white men are ignorant of their privilege).

Be vigilant about doing your own personal work to rid yourself of prejudice and bias about dominant group members. When in the marginalized group, we can often feel like we have to educate others and miss the opportunity to examine our own biases that keep us from establishing healthy relationships with dominant group members. We can often fall into the trap of assuming dominant group members have no knowledge, interest, or skill with regard to diversity and inclusion issues.

Do the work it takes to counteract internalized oppression. Those in marginalized groups can often internalize the negative messages about their group and discount their worth. Internalized oppression can also result in attacking other marginalized group members in order to ease the pain of subordination. Do the work it takes to counteract the effects of internalized oppression by talking with others in your group and honestly confronting your own tendencies to oppress yourself and others in your group.

Assume good intent and check on intent when unsure. It is easy to assume negative intent of those in dominant groups as we tend to assess the current situation based on previous interactions. Assume individuals have a positive intention and check with them when in doubt.

Allow yourself to have a multifaceted identity. Many of us have rich, wonderful social group identities that define so much of who we are in the world. At the same time, we can be so focused on one group identity that we miss the many other ways we can develop our overall identities. Assumptions and pressures from others may get in the way of us exploring the many facets of who we can be. For example, for many years I was told I wasn't "black enough." I got blamed and shamed for being too white. I let this pressure affect me and was so focused on asserting my racial identity as a person of color that I stopped exploring the ways I connected with people based on many other group memberships.

Considerations for both groups:

This work takes grace and patience. Probably the greatest learning I have had about communicating with those who are different from me by any dimension is to have grace with myself and with others. It takes an incredible amount of care and compassion for ourselves and others to sustain relationships with people who see and experience the world in different ways than we do. At the same time, the triggers that come up for us when we are confronting situations of conflict are almost always some of the greatest gems in terms of our learning and development. It seems simple to say this, but the mantra I hold in my head is "hang in there...there is almost always a breakdown before a breakthrough."

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CONTINUING THE JOURNEY:

One of the common issues leaders have when engaging issues of diversity and inclusion in the workplace is counteracting the tendency to view the work as a "one and done" effort. This belief often leads to people thinking that taking one 2-hour training or reading a few articles is sufficient to becoming competent in managing differences. It is important to remember that effectively managing dynamics of diversity is a lifetime journey. In an organizational setting it is a process that must continue to be nurtured and embedded into the business culture with specific attention to systems, processes, procedures, and interpersonal dynamics. At the individual and interpersonal level, building competence with diversity and inclusion takes time, effort, and a whole lot of patience with self and others. Diversity itself is not a problem to be solved, but rather a rich field of possibility, creativity, and vitality that requires nurturing and cultivating. Intentional focus on skill-development and inclusive practices yields great return. Hopefully, the suggestions included in this article will support the reader in continuing the journey with greater clarity and richer learning.

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