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A PERSPECTIVE **Diversity 2.0 — What We Must Become**

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A PERSPECTIVE

Diversity 2.0 — What We Must Become

Joe Gerstandt



Joe Gerstandt is a Leadership, Diversity and Communication Consultant who also conducts diversity and inclusion workshops. As Diversity Director for Alegent Health he initiated a comprehensive, award-winning diversity and inclusion strategy.

As a discipline or a body of work, I believe the field of diversity and inclusion is still, to a large degree, in its infancy. Our profession is building momentum and we are on the verge of making significant headway in becoming a driving force in the success, vitality and authenticity of our organizations and communities. We are, in fact, approaching a time when our work will be fully embraced as one of the key levers in the pursuit of competitive advantage in an increasingly rigorous, global and fast-paced marketplace. It is with this in mind that I find myself reflecting on our profession and thinking about the road ahead.

This is an important time for our work and we can benefit from some reflection regarding what has brought us to this point and what will take us forward. I am grateful for and respectful of the folks who have come before me in this line of work. Someone once told me this work is for rebels, revolutionaries, saints, poets and warriors. I feel fortunate to say that I have met many people who prove it true, and I am humbled to contribute to this legacy. I do not look to our shared future without appreciation for those who have brought us to where we collectively stand today and I do not suggest making fundamental changes to how we go about our work. Instead, I believe that the world of business is constantly changing (now more rapidly than ever before) and that we must continually evolve, both as individual practitioners and as a profession.

In general, I believe that we are a profession in good health, steadily led forward by tested and savvy practitioners, a growing number of publications, portals and resources, and a (small) group of gifted consultants and thought leaders. We are beginning to benefit from real synergy, collaboration and cross-pollination. At the same time, there are some steep steps directly in front of us. These steps are important and will bring much change to our work. What follows in this article is an overview of what I believe to be the high priority areas of focus — boldness, innovation and honesty — as the steps we need to take. I humbly submit it for your review.

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We Must Be Bold

When a professional or social movement achieves a real or perceived seat at the table, it is at that time that it must become vigilant about its own caution or hesitancy. Having something to lose and the fear of that potential loss can choke the daring and the genius out of a body of

work. If our work is to continue to evolve and mature we must drive forward as though we have nothing to lose, as the alternative may be much worse.

Leave the Nest — While there are a growing number of exceptions, diversity and inclusion work has traditionally been housed within the corporate human resources function. We must increase the intensity of our efforts to change this. For many reasons, human resources is a natural partner but *it cannot be our home or our boss*. A great deal of our work falls outside the domain of human resources expertise and experience. In addition, the profession of human resources faces challenges of its own. We can no longer be anchored to a function that is struggling to demonstrate its strategic merit. It is critical for the success of our work that we have a voice in conversations of strategy and we cannot rely on human resources to provide that voice. The time has come for us to radically increase our efforts to cultivate real partnerships with information technology, finance, marketing, communications, line units and other stakeholders.

Under New Management — As a profession we must come together around the call for a new model of management. This will be a great challenge, but is potentially the most significant contribution we could make to organizational and community success. The need for management as we know it is dead. Our current approach to management is expensive and obstructs the work of knowledge workers and innovative teams. Knowledge workers do not need bosses; they need support and protection from corporate politics and process.

As organizations evolve and innovation and design become critical, expertise and potential lies in relationships and the environment, not in titles or hierarchies. Teams can more effectively direct their own work if they have someone who can find and provide the resources they need, support them emotionally and help them effectively navigate their work-life demands. The employee-employer relationship needs to continue morphing into an adult-adult relationship and we are perfectly situated to help make this happen.

The current antiquated management model, with its emphasis on hierarchy and politics, has always been at odds with the philosophy of inclusion. Changing this will not only benefit organizational success it will represent a major change for our work. This is no small challenge. Management is usually the last group that wants to hear they are part of the problem.

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We Must Be Innovative

While our profession has a great deal to be proud of, we must be careful not to rest on our laurels. Our work is complex and falls across multiple disciplines and functions of the organization. In order to continue increasing our footprint and leverage, we need to consistently seek innovative ways to communicate, collaborate, implement our work and add value to the organization. The diversity and inclusion function of an organization should set an example and be a rich portal for new ideas, tools, approaches and perspectives. Since we are still one of those functions that are often under funded we must make the best use of innovative technologies and tools to accomplish more with less.

Get Wired — We must be relentless in our efforts to use and leverage new technology. This may sound like common sense in a time that is so technology driven, but I believe we have fallen behind and have much catching up to do. It is critical that we use technology and use it correctly, and I am not just talking about computer-based training. Diversity and inclusion are

both relational concepts and they need to be learned, examined and practiced in relation to others. While I personally believe that very little diversity and inclusion training can be conducted with a computer there are other opportunities for us.

Giving voice is a fundamental component of inclusion work and web applications. There are huge opportunities for our work and for further democratization of the workplace in tools like instant messaging, weblogs, wikis, pod and videocasting. These tools, when expertly used, can connect, give voice and change the way in which information, ideas and opportunities are shared and configured in the workplace. Social networking applications (LinkedIn, MySpace, etc.) and social network analysis represent key opportunities for driving more integration of personal and professional networks, which can help drive long-term change.

Research shows that our networks remain highly segregated and this is certainly the case for those that serve on boards of directors and as senior executives. If we can find ways to drive the integration of social and professional networks at that level, it may do more to integrate the board rooms and C-level suites in corporate America than anything we are currently doing. Regardless of what we say, personal relationships, connections and referrals still play a powerful role in job attainment and access to opportunity. We must act accordingly.

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It is of great concern to me that as a profession, we are not talking about these and other emerging technologies and how to best leverage them for our work. If we are not talking about these developments now, we will fall behind the curve of progress. I rarely hear diversity and inclusion practitioners (or human resources or organization development leaders for that matter) talking about these technologies and that must change.

Do Something Different — I attended a diversity conference last year and noticed that some sessions were reserved for professionals that had been in the field for more than 15 years. I understand the thinking behind this, but it occurred to me that this flies in the face of what diversity and inclusion claims to offer and wants to change. The more I thought about it, the more frustrated I became with our failure to take different and innovative approaches toward "conferencing" in general. Our conferences are similar to those of any other profession on the planet. Maybe I am missing something here, but ours should be different.

We are about diversity and inclusion, and our events and conferences should all demonstrate these values. We should innovate, take risks and try different approaches. We should be the profession that meets, connects, shares and collaborates with the least amount of hierarchy, process and policy involved. We must trust each other more and expect more of ourselves. We must take risks and be relentless in our pursuit of new methods, tools and models.

Open Space Technology (OST), a meeting and conference methodology which is to a large degree self organizing, is a perfect example. This approach capitalizes on diversity of opinion and experience and places priority on ideas, questions and passion rather than titles or positions. When will we see a diversity conference that incorporates OST? It is long overdue. Each time talented diversity practitioners gather in one place and someone believes they know how and what to *teach* them, we are missing a powerful opportunity. Our profession must become **the** cutting edge of innovative human capital, talent management, learning and development disciplines.

Can You Hear Me Now? — Because so much of our work is connected to the capacity of people to authentically communicate with one another it seems valuable for us to champion alternative models of communication. For example, a smorgasbord of books and trainings that focus on the capacity for difficult, fierce, crucial and other types of conversations, are currently available. Based on a limited review, these approaches are worth further investigation.

We must champion authentic communication in the workplace and increase our capacity for dialogue. If I could pick one training program to invest in for 12 months it would be a strong communications program, with some additional focus on facilitating dialogue for managers. Communication is a key for us and it seems that at times we overlook it. We can also increase organizational capacity for communication by building in mediation skills and promoting facilitated communities of practice.

We Must Be Honest

Ours is a profession that faces a unique kind of scrutiny. The investments recommended by CFOs or CIOs are never challenged in the same way that our recommendations are. It is not that these other folks are above the law. They too will be challenged and questioned at times, but not in the way that we will. We know that our work brings a fair amount of political baggage with it, as well as fear and discomfort. This may or may not change as we continue our work, but regardless it is important for us to be well prepared.

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We must reach out and share this scrutiny with fellow practitioners in order to be better prepared to respond in the face of real scrutiny. We can strengthen our skills and our approach by challenging and being honest with each other. If our language, business case, methodology or other aspects of our work are weak or flawed, we must call each other out. Generating weak and or flawed work is something we cannot afford to do.

Keep Our House in Order — As a field or a discipline evolves, the competencies required of its practitioners changes. To a large degree, our profession was born of the efforts of those that were extremely passionate about diversity and inclusion issues. This passion was a critical catalyst for our early victories. Passion is valuable to any profession.

We have reached a point, however, where passion alone is not enough. Today, effectiveness in this work requires a broad set of tools, including talent management, social network analysis, social marketing, branding, organizational and individual psychology, social cognition, strategy, adult learning, evidence-based management and more. At a time of increased resistance we cannot risk having our efforts neutralized by passionate yet ineffective practitioners. We must expect a great deal of ourselves and from each other.

Close the Deal — Regarding our competencies it would appear that clarity in selling the business case is not one of them. There are still lots of people in lots of professions running around questioning the "business case for diversity," and we must view that as a failure on our part. The business case for investing in diversity is strong, but we have not been effective in communicating it.

Effective communication of the business case begins with further clarification of terms and concepts. This is a key component of our work that demands much more discipline from us

than it has received so far. We must be clear about what diversity means and what inclusion means. We must stop trumpeting the benefits of cognitive difference while focusing on issues and initiatives specific to identify difference. We must stop using the terms diversity, inclusion and cultural competence as if they were interchangeable. They are each different, offer different benefits and require different types of investments and initiatives.

We should make a powerful commitment to each other and to our profession to make the business case our burning platform for the next 12 months. We need to make every effort and take advantage of opportunities to clarify and build our business cases for investing in diversity and inclusion, and then share and examine them together. I have attended far too many diversity conference presentations that had the words "business case" in their title but spoke to it only in a general and vague manner that we have become far too accustomed to. I have purchased far too many diversity books that offered the exact same thinking to believe that as a profession we actually have a decent handle on this. If we cannot handle this piece of our work, we have evolved as far as we will.

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There are some relatively untapped mountains of research that make our case even stronger. Research in social cognition, social psychology, innovation, creativity, evidence-based management, cognitive diversity, the nature of networks and the functioning of the brain all bring powerful scientific firepower to our work. The time has come to clarify the multiple business cases for investing in diversity and inclusion and begin carrying the big stick of massive amounts of data. For far too long we have stood by as others have thrown stones at a vague business case.

Final Thoughts

Yes, our profession is in a healthy place. Employee networks and affinity groups are making critical contributions to the improvement of corporate policies and processes, the development of marketing strategies, product development and other areas of business. Fortune 500 CEOs are touting the role that diversity has played in the success of their organizations.

We should be proud of where we stand and thankful for those who have brought us here. It is important that we continue to evolve, pushing and supporting each other. We must be equally aware of how far we have come, where we are now and where we must go. I for one look forward to the journey.

Joe Gerstandt would love to hear from you and can be reached at joe.gerstandt@gmail.com. He also maintains a blog on Diversity, Inclusion and Connectivity at OurTimeToAct.com.



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