



# Diversity Unraveled

BY DANIEL HOLDEN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Diverse leadership teams outperform more homogeneous teams but can initially be more difficult to manage. Difference can tear us apart or bring us together; it depends on our response. Four critical concepts, when understood and applied, can help bring teams together in transformative ways and pave the way to inspired performance.

Hurricane Katrina brought us images that America wished would simply go away: pictures of black Americans stranded for days on rooftops and in parking lots waiting for help that would not come. The storm has since passed but race and class dynamics embedded in rebuilding the city continue. The outskirts of Paris was the scene of violent racial and class uprisings last winter as other European cities wondered whether they would be next. In my hometown in Connecticut, swastikas painted on the car windows of several people of color made the news recently.

Race relations, gender equity, and sexual harassment, as well as the (at times violent) debate about gay rights are simmering indicators of the dynamics of difference that will not quickly or easily disappear.

My perspectives on diversity are born out of 20 years of facilitating difficult but refreshingly candid dialogue with a wide range of business leaders — from Fortune 100 companies to education associations and many small businesses. Along with my colleagues at Elsie Y. Cross Associates, I have seen that the dynamics of difference are emotionally volatile issues. Yet I have seen four critical concepts that, when accepted and applied to our leadership, consistently result in less tension, greater understanding across differences, and greater confidence and skill grappling with tough issues. Real breakthroughs in productivity and competitive success are possible only when difference has been met with insight and competence.

### I am the culture

An organization cannot grow beyond the point where its leaders have ventured. The great mystics and poets from the past thousand years have

delivered this one message to each of us: Nothing changes until we do. Everything changes once we do. It is impossible to grow to adulthood in America without biases. My 22-year-old daughter was four years old when she asked, “Dad, are all dark-skinned people bad?” Men and women of all backgrounds have biases, and we each deny this is so. Many of our biases lie just under our awareness, invisible to us but clearly visible to those who are different from us. This reality does not make us racist or sexist or homophobic; it simply means we’re human.

We are instantly better served when we begin with the conscious assumption that biases in us may affect those around us in ways we don’t see. Then we can practice paying attention to ourselves rather than simply denying what is true. What we as leaders pay attention to, others will follow. If we’re in denial, others will be, too. The subtle but powerful influence of unconscious assumptions is seen everywhere we look. If you are a leader with strong religious convictions and you’re tempted to speak out against gay rights, remember: Yours was not initially a religious dilemma but a decidedly personal one. You had learned biases long before you were taught, as an adult, selective scriptural passages that confirmed them. You did not show up neutral as an adult.

If you are white and have grown tired of the storm of protests raised by Katrina, class action employment lawsuits on race, and other events, remember: Your feelings are affected by biases you absorbed from television, newspapers, movies, magazines, and many well-intentioned people long ago. You did not magically arrive to adulthood neutral on these matters. At deep levels, many people of various races carry hidden assumptions that

dark skin means “less than.”

If you are a man in a senior-level position in virtually any corporation, you are in the company of many other men like you. If you are asked, “Why aren’t there more women leaders?” remember this before you answer: Your answers are colored by the hidden layers of an old iceberg below the surface of your awareness. Most men, as a group, carry the assumption of superiority, learned long ago in our families, reinforced by television and our peers. I learned my lessons at age four and five. Do you know what these hidden biases are or how they operate? If you do not know, these hidden assumptions could manage you rather than you managing them.

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- I was on the phone with my credit card company recently, speaking with what sounded like a Hispanic woman. I found myself getting increasingly frustrated with her inability to immediately solve my problem. I also knew that I was quicker to doubt her competence than I am with customer service people who speak like I do.
- I got onto a commercial jet recently for flight. When I discovered both the pilot and co-pilot were women, I noticed I was a bit concerned about my safety for just a moment.
- My daughter had sleepovers for many years as she moved through school. Most of the time, I was delighted to be the host, easily welcoming kids for a night of pizza, movies, and talk about boys. One night, this routine changed, at least for me. My daughter told me one of the sleepover guests was a lesbian. I noticed myself keeping closer watch over the girls than I had in the past. I felt I needed to protect them from this lesbian girl, and I had no idea where this protectiveness came

from. That night and others that followed passed without incident.

These are examples of some of the subtle ways my own biases operate. I have known and worked with extraordinary people over the years who have dedicated their lives to these issues. Not one of these masters would ever claim to have no biases. The only people I've encountered who claim to be bias-free are those who show little evidence of having done much personal development or self-reflection.

We carry and embody the organizational culture through our actions. The culture is not out there but alive and well in here, in us. When we open ourselves to learning, we model the kind of authentic leadership others can look to during times of transition.

### **I am many: The power of group identity**

If you have traveled outside your country, you have had this surprising experience. If you have walked or driven through neighborhoods in your own town or city where the people don't look like you, you've also had this experience. If you're left-handed, you've had this experience. The experience is losing your identity as an individual and assuming the identity as a member of a group. You stop being seen as Stephen or Nancy or Eldridge and instead become the American. You're the Black Person. You become the Lefthander who needs to be told again where you can sit without disturbing others (i.e., righthanders) at the table. We each hold memberships to many groups.

Often, other people see our group memberships long before they see us as individuals. Sometimes we can work alongside someone for years and never see him or her as an individual; we get stuck on their group identity. Some of our groups are assigned at birth (gender, race, sexual orientation, age) while others are acquired along the way (socioeconomic status, religion,

company affiliation, occupation). Some memberships are visible, while many are not. Some we are very proud of, while others we may hide because of negative associations attached to membership in them. It is important to note that nothing is personal at the group level. What happens to us — good or bad, right or wrong — comes at us primarily because of our group memberships as others perceive them. It is not about us as individuals.

Now comes the challenging part. Even though we share a common value set across race, gender, and sexual orientation (despite what we read in the media or hear from some pulpits), we have not had the same kinds of experiences. I learned the hard way that while I have had an enjoyable and challenging ride through corporate America as a white man, it would be foolish to assume that men and women of color have had the same consistent experience. It would be absurd to conclude that because I am listened to and seen as credible as a white professional man that women as a group tend to have the same experience. They don't.

Because groups have collective experiences, it follows there is a cumulative pattern of outcomes suffered by some people to which others are oblivious. So the next time you see people of color winning class-action lawsuits or gays marching in the street or hear about women being the primary owners of small businesses in America, you can rest assured there has been a pattern of treatment they have endured that may be different from your own. The momentary events we now see are just the most recent signs of a repetitive cycle.

The good news? We don't have to conclude there is always a race, gender, or sexual orientation dynamic that accounts for what we witness. But leaders have to be willing to consider the possibility that there might be. And learn to ask about it: "Tell me more about how race ties into this." "What

aspect of being a woman impacts your promotion experience?" "Tell me how you see your experience as a lesbian holding you back in this company." We might be surprised by what we hear.

Inquiry, in a litigious culture, is often seen as a risky proposition. Many of us have been trained not to go there. Our inquiry, contrary to what we fear, not only does not escalate the problem, it meets the problem directly and begins to dissipate the problem's energy. Remember that just because we have not individually experienced or noticed a pattern of treatment does not negate the possibility that it occurs on a group level. Wise leaders come to understand that group-level identity is a powerful force that shapes the way we behave and the way we are seen and treated.

A colleague invited me to a fundraiser in his hometown. A group from his church was raising money to hire a coordinator for an after-school remedial reading program for high school students. The leader of this group, a United Airlines pilot, had individually met with the school board and successfully argued the need for this program. He then met with the bus company and negotiated additional routes and reduced fares for all students who participated in this program. This man designed and carried out a regional search for a top-notch director to run the program.

When I got to the fundraiser I saw our state legislators, mayor, and local television and radio personalities. There were easily a thousand people present. My friend invited me to meet the man who was the architect of this entire project. I was introduced to a tall, distinguished black man. For an instant, I noticed myself feeling surprised. I introduced myself and congratulated him on a successful project. Later that evening, I confided in my friend what I had seen earlier in myself. This was an eye-opening conversation for both of us.

In the history of the world, my

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momentary surprise matters little. But what about his experience? What if this man's cumulative group experience was having his brilliance and competence routinely questioned by white people? What if decent people like myself were consistently surprised by his capabilities and unconsciously closed doors of opportunity because of our hidden assumptions? What if we consistently missed the individual standing in front of us?

I have learned that surprises like this and my experience with the women pilots often reveal unconscious group-level assumptions I carry about the potential of others. If I want to build a competitive, inclusive culture on my team, part of my work is to see and then move through the limiting assumptions I carry. This work is not for the faint of heart.

One of the most powerful descriptions of this dynamic between individual and group identity came from the voice of a African-American woman in a workshop. She made two statements: "Don't ever see me as an African-American woman." (My translation: Don't lump me into a group you see as inferior and then forget about me. I am a unique individual like you.) And "Don't ever forget I'm an African-American woman." (My translation: My cumulative experience is likely to be very different from yours. My ability to move ideas through others, gain commitment from others, be seen as competent and capable, is likely to be different than yours. I do not ask for sympathy but awareness. Wake up.) As we learn about the power of group memberships, we can see these two statements are not contradictory.

That night of the fundraiser, I began a diligent personal inquiry into the question, What else do I believe blacks, and black men in particular, cannot do? Check with me in another 80 years and I'll give you what I've found out — not about others but about myself.

### Who's in, who's out: Power dynamics between groups

In this article, we have so far discovered we are much more than what we seem to ourselves. There are unknown regions within that seep out without our permission. There are groups we are part of that we may not have thought about before.

Here is the next piece of news: Not all groups are seen as equal. Far more than just an extension of our elementary school who's in, who's out experience, this power difference between groups can be seen at the core of virtually every trouble spot in the world. Several points of difference shed light on why this is so.

Dominant groups:

- Have power
- Make the rules
- Define reality
- Are seen as normal and right
- Are assumed to be competent
- See events as isolated and unrelated
- Fit in
- Struggle to see groups
- Focus on their good intentions
- May miss the experience of subordi-

nated groups  
Subordinated groups:

- Want access to power
- Follow the rules
- Have views on reality that are seen as invalid
- Are seen as different, less than, or suspect
- Are assumed to be inferior
- See patterns
- Are outsiders
- See their own and other groups easily
- Focus on outcomes
- Are very aware of the dominant group

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The cumulative experience of holding many dominant group memberships, as I do, is one of relative comfort, confidence, and power. I frequently have wondered, What's the problem? What do they want? whether I'm reacting to the push for gay marriage laws, class-action lawsuits won by women, or the lack of black general managers in pro sports. The truth is that from my privileged position (i.e., as a man, white person, heterosexual, middle-to-upper middle class person,

## Diversity improves decision making

New academic research indicates that diverse groups perform better than homogeneous groups when it comes to decision making and that this is largely due to dramatic differences in the way whites behave in diverse groups — changes that occur even before group members begin to interact.

"Traditional arguments in favor of diversity often focus on ethics, morality, and constitutionality," said Samuel R. Sommers, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at Tufts University. "I wanted to look at the observable effects of diversity on performance."

In a study involving mock juries, panels of whites and blacks performed better than all-white groups by a number of measures: They deliberated longer, raised more facts about the case, and had thorough deliberations. "They also made fewer factual errors in discussing evidence, and when errors did occur, those errors were more likely to be corrected during the discussion," according to Sommers.

The difference was primarily due to significant changes in white behavior. Whites on diverse juries cited more case facts, made fewer mistakes in recalling facts and evidence, and pointed out missing evidence more frequently than did those on all-white juries. They were also more amenable to discussing racism when in diverse groups.

Somers believes that the study has significant applications for business, higher education, and other institutions that grapple with difficult or controversial issues.

"Because the study examines group decision making in a realistic setting, the findings have potential implications for a variety of contexts — from the classroom to the boardroom or wherever a premium is placed on fact-finding and reaching a good decision," he said.

physically able, HQ staff, senior leader, line staff), there is no real problem unless I decree it so. For those who hold many subordinated memberships (women, people of color, those with disabilities, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, the poor, HR and staff people, field operations, etc.) the cumulative experience is often one of being held back, kept down, locked out, second-guessed, and not seriously considered equal to (let alone superior to) their dominant group counterparts. The next time your words or behavior offend someone and you're tempted to think this person is just sensitive or has an axe to grind, consider you may be the most recent of a thousand people who've offended her this way.

Barbara is a black banker in a large financial services organization in the East. She has been in her position for seven years and has trained her past two managers (both white men), who have both since moved on to more senior positions. Her performance

evaluations have consistently been outstanding, yet she has been overlooked each time she has applied for the positions she then trained others to hold. The senior officers in her region deny there is any race issue, citing the lack of qualifications as the reason for Barbara's failure to advance like her largely white and male colleagues. When confronted, however, they are unable to cite specifically which qualifications are missing but insist the issue is not race. Barbara has decided not to apply for the current opening above her. Her superiors question her motivation, wonder whether she has what it takes to advance, but elect to discuss none of this with her directly. Barbara hears the office chatter, shakes her head in amazement, and commits herself to conscientious, high-quality work each day. Her leadership acumen, she decides, will be best used in her community and volunteer work. However, the day the executive recruiter phones she takes the call.

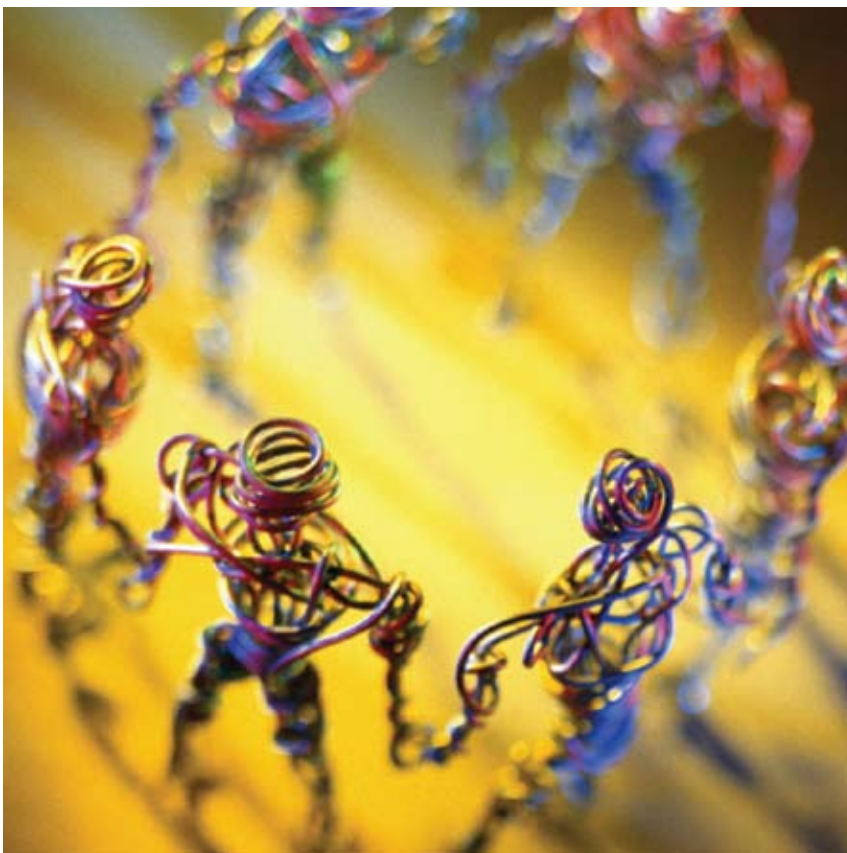
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**We can incorrectly assume we're being objective and rational when in truth we're reacting to unconscious data we deny we carry.**

Good, well-intentioned people can do stupid things. I speak from personal experience. For those of us who hold memberships in many groups with power and privilege, our unconscious hard wiring leads us to assume people who are different are less than us. Our unexamined assumptions carry more weight than objective data such as performance evaluations. We can incorrectly assume we're being objective and rational when in truth we're reacting to unconscious data we deny we carry.

In any given instance, there are at least 10 sets of data we would need to consider before concluding that there is no race, gender, or sexual orientation issue at play in our organization:

- What is the individual history of each person involved?
- What is the history of this kind of incident in this part of the organization?
- What specific training or development activities have managers been through to help them prepare for managing a diverse work force?
- What differences exist — by race, gender, or sexual orientation — in the company's turnover rate (voluntary and involuntary) in this department?
- What differences exist in average performance appraisal ratings among race, gender, and sexual orientation groups? Are these facts known and discussed?
- What differences are there in the average tenure in current position?
- What groups are represented at what levels in the organization? Where are there gaps? What is the history of efforts to reduce these gaps?
- To what extent are managers rated in their ability to work effectively across a diverse work force? Where are these skills measured in performance appraisal and incentive plans? How does the manager of this area stack up?



- What hiring patterns exist in the specific area in question? How diverse is the pool of candidates? Of those recruited, how many women and people of color are selected?
- What is the pattern of anecdotal data (from employee surveys, climate or morale assessments, and culture surveys) from this department? Is this data broken down by race, gender, sexual orientation, and level?

When we're committed to leading with integrity, we need to have a handle on a broad sweep of information before we can honestly conclude there is no race, gender, or sexual orientation bias. Our national newspapers are replete with stories of leaders taking the easy way out and having to pay the price later.

In our example, the real possibility is that Barbara is seen as not qualified because that's how we see her through the unconscious lens of our group bias. When we acknowledge the reality and power of our group identity, extraordinary breakthroughs can occur. If we choose to remain asleep, nothing new can happen. Nothing changes until we do; everything changes once we do.

### **Courageous dialogue: The only antidote to sleepwalking**

We have a clear, consistent, historical record in the United States and corporate America that if we do nothing around these issues, nothing good will happen. Intervention of some sort is always necessary if we want outcomes that are different. We also know that awareness is not enough, nor is passing more legislation always the answer. Every organization greater than 15 people has a policy that commits the organization to fair treatment of employees under its equal employment opportunity protection. Virtually every organization also has the glass ceiling beyond which women and people of color seldom rise. Policy and

laws are not enough. We need real dialogue with one another about difference so we can learn to talk about these issues in useful ways. The keys above can help, perhaps sooner than you think.

My wife heads up an organization in the state capital where we live. Periodically, she has an opportunity to meet with our governor through her work on various committees. Recently, she bought a new suit for one of these meetings and came downstairs one evening wearing it to ask me what I thought. (Here's where it gets messy.)

I told her I thought she looked good in the suit (I wished I had just stopped here), and then these words leaked out of my large, foolish mouth: "The suit makes you look trim." Of course, Lisa's immediate response was something like, "Oh, so you think I look large in my other clothes? You think I look round?" I could barely hear her because of the blood racing through the fat, dense material where my brain used to be. I heard my dominant group (man) voice whispering in my head, "This is stupid" but missed my dominant group (thin, athletic) voice that said, "Thin women under the age of 21 are better because I said so." I immediately went into my dominant group dance, "You know that's not what I meant at all," when my wife turned to me and said, "You men are all alike!"

I knew this was no longer an exchange between me and my wife but a group-level exchange between my wife and men, of which I was an embarrassed and trapped member. Strangely, seeing this at a group level made it easier to stay engaged (since nothing is personal at the group level and therefore it is often easier to communicate).

In a moment of singular insight and bold courage I asked, "What do you mean?" What I heard staggered me: My wife was repeatedly in the company of men who felt it their obli-

gation to discuss which women were beautiful, dressed well, had a nice figure, or did not meet their standard. She had yet to be in a discussion with men in which competency, contribution, or the path to great service were discussed. She was exhausted with the unending emphasis on appearance.

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I learned a lot about the experience of one I love and live so close to. How could I have missed this before? What patterns of treatment am I missing with those beloved and trusted colleagues of mine I have worked closely with over the years? The only hope of ever finding out and making a difference for their lives and my own is to engage them directly and stop living with my head in the sand.

The kitchen dialogue helped me see a side of Lisa's experience I had not seen before. My willingness to hear her without defending my good intentions and debating her experience showed her a side of me that, regrettably, she would like to see more of. It does not matter whether our dialogue occurs in the kitchen or the project team meeting or the boardroom. It matters only that it happens.

Years ago I made a conscious choice about the direction I would take with my life. I wanted to make my country and maybe the world a better place. I decided the best venue in which to do this was corporate America — not the church, not higher education, not community service, not the military. All of these options have merit, but I was convinced the workplace held the greatest leverage for change. We build our lives, our futures, and make many of our best contributions here.

Now, after more than a quarter century of corporate work, I feel the same.

When as leaders we commit ourselves to learning, to recognizing our group memberships, and the inherent power differences between them and learn how to talk across these differences, great things can and do happen. ❖