

HOW TO PUT OUR DIFFERENCES TO WORK

Debbe Kennedy

It is widely acknowledged that diversity and inclusion make important contributions to organizations, but did you know they have taken on a new significance? Organizations and individuals all over the world are discovering that knowledge and know-how for putting differences to work is a critical skill and the most powerful accelerator for generating new ideas, creating innovative solutions, executing organizational strategies, and engaging everyone in the process. Business is at the threshold of a new frontier that draws *innovation, leadership, diversity, and inclusion* into a powerful foursome. In over a decade of ongoing collaborative research and practical experiments, futurist and filmmaker Joel Barker and I have explored this territory together. He defined the compelling business case in 2000: “Societies and organizations [and individuals] that most creatively incorporate diversity will reap the rewards of innovation, growth, wealth, and progress.”

In an increasing number of studies and practical experiments across all sectors, we are learning that innovation lies at the intersection of human differences. In its broadest sense, diversity encompasses everything from thinking styles, problem-solving approaches, experiences, competencies, work habits, and management styles to ethnic origins, cultural backgrounds, and gen-

erational insight, as well as all the traditional diversity considerations and everything that makes us who we are. (See Figure 1.) The big question for leaders: How do we master the fastest way to innovation by putting all these differences to work? A number of possibilities are readily accessible.

Applying What You Already Know

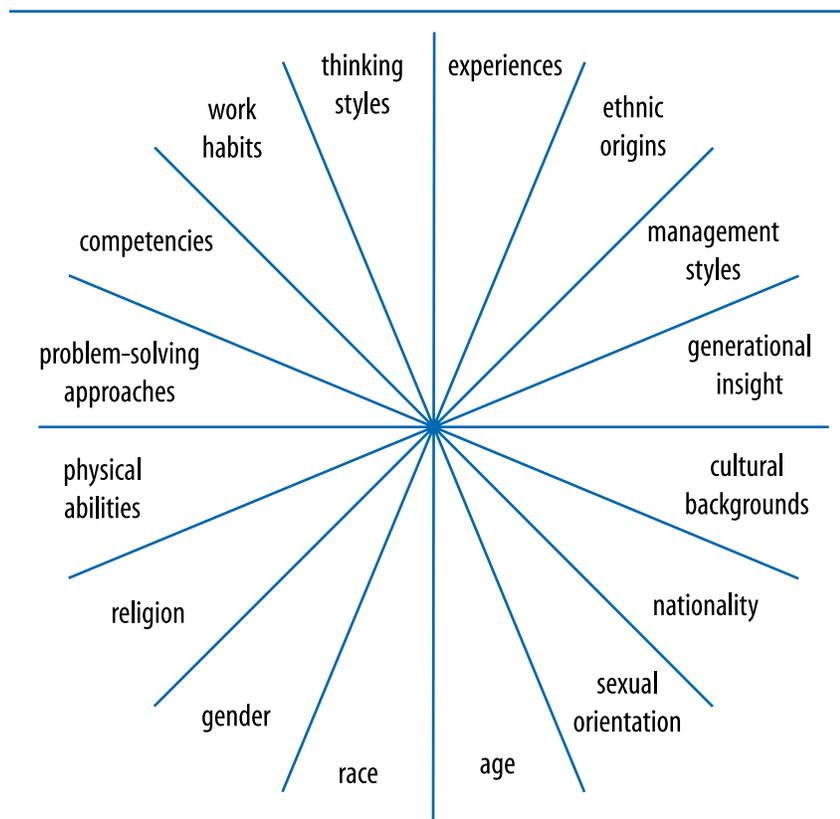
The good news is that expanding your leadership portfolio to include the mastery of putting differences to work will draw upon everything you’ve observed, experienced, and know about leadership and business management. Peter Drucker set the stage when he wrote, in *Post-Capitalist Society*, “Most of us (perhaps all of us) know many times more than we put to use. We do not mobilize the multiple knowledges we possess. We do not use all our knowledge as part of one toolbox.” He went on to point out that most of us tend to classify what we know into specialized areas of knowledge, instead of combining the strengths of all our knowledge and applying it to different problems—looking at the problems and issues we face and asking ourselves, “What do I know, what have I learned, that I might

Putting differences to work is a critical skill.

apply to this task?” If you keep this in mind, you will discover you know much more than you think you do about putting differences to work. So how do you begin? I’ve found the best way is to start. Begin integrating “people considerations” into your day-to-day leadership practice, step by step.

As with any change you are leading in your organization or within yourself, this effort is best guided by a process. I have one that has passed the test of time (see Figure 2). The six steps depict the ever-changing, perpetual cycle of action that has brought about great change throughout the ages in organizations, institutions, businesses, communities, countries, and the world—and even in individuals. Its imperfect circle symbolizes the realities of any kind of change, including the change necessary to turn putting differences to work into a key driver of your leadership and organizational success. As you take a mental walk through its steps, you’ll no doubt find you are in familiar territory.

Let’s look closely at each of the six steps, discussing what takes place and its role in helping you put dif-



Source: Debbe Kennedy, *Putting Our Differences to Work: The Fastest Way to Innovation, Leadership, and High Performance* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008).

FIGURE 1. DIMENSIONS OF DIFFERENCE



Source: Debbie Kennedy, *Putting Our Differences to Work: The Fastest Way to Innovation, Leadership, and High Performance* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008).

FIGURE 2. PUTTING OUR DIFFERENCES TO WORK MODEL: SIX STEPS THAT MAKE IT WORK.

ferences to work. I’ve included insights and examples from other leaders and suggested key actions to begin putting each step into practice.

Step 1—Assessment: Defining Current Realities

It is doubtful any of us would put self-assessment of ourselves or our organizations on a list of our favorite pastimes, but the process itself is freeing. It feels good to know where we are, how we are, and what challenges lie ahead. With a focus on putting differences to work in ways that will draw innovation, leadership, diversity, and inclusion together into the powerful foursome discussed earlier, regular assessment is more important than ever before. We’re in uncharted territory. Traditional diversity and inclusion measurements will continue to be helpful indicators to keep us on track

in building and maintaining diversity in our workforce and the inclusive environments that bring out the best in everyone. What they don’t measure directly are the conscious behaviors and proficiency essential to apply the advantages of our many dimensions of difference as drivers of innovation.

Over the years, I’ve noticed that leaders who are proficient at putting differences to work incorporate self-assessment into their leadership work as a natural course of business. Emily Duncan, former vice president of culture and diversity at Hewlett-Packard, and her team made a clear business connection in every region of the world at HP. They described it this way: “Diversity and inclusion drive creativity and productivity, which drives innovation and high performance; which leads to business success.” She developed what she terms a direct approach to assessment:

You can learn a lot about where you are and where you need to go from talking with others. If I want to know what people think—where they stand and what they need in order to contribute more—I ask them. It often opens the way for new possibilities and provides valuable input for strategic decisions—and sometimes it feels real good inside when I see, through others’ ideas and the meaningful change they are creating, that the hard work has made a significant difference.

Key Actions for Assessment

- Add ongoing self-assessment to your leadership practice; include the five leadership behaviors into your assessments (see sidebar, “Five Leadership Behaviors”).
- Use simple measures to guide and build proficiency, encouraging conscious day-to-day practice from leaders at all levels.
- Ask the people if you want to know how you’re doing putting differences to work.

Step 2—Acceptance: Developing Support for Change

Success at leading any kind of change depends largely on whether those involved—leaders, employees, sponsors, citizens, students, volunteers—feel the need for change deeply at a personal level. Gaining individual *acceptance* of any new idea is the most critical success factor in leading change, and it also applies to building

*Diversity and inclusion
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productivity.*

FIVE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

Five essential behaviors for everyone’s portfolio of skills at all levels:

Making diversity a conscious priority for explorations, collaborations, and teams to generate new ideas for innovation.

Getting to know people and their differences as a day-to-day practice; building skills and knowledge of who and when and how to tap into the best talent.

Enabling rich communication in every setting and using it as a strategic tool for discovery, exploration, and influence.

Holding personal responsibility as a core value, which inspires, enables, and influences new levels of trust in others and reaches across boundaries.

Making mutualism the final arbiter for all decisions, generating win-win-win results so that everyone benefits; no one is harmed.

a culture that thrives on putting differences to work. Everyone has to believe in it.

Grace Cathedral in San Francisco serves as a shining example of how the fastest way to innovation, leadership, and new levels of contribution comes from bringing together a diverse group of people in a welcoming, inclusive environment that thrives on putting differences to work. The Very Reverend Alan Jones, dean of the cathedral, and I talked one time as Grace was in the process of fulfilling its renewed vision. We explored ideas about differences and the importance of acceptance:

It is accepting the gift of our differences that moves us toward creativity and stability. Part of the discipline of leadership is helping people imagine and enjoy the *otherness* of others, seeing and delighting in its promise. One of the ironies of life is that what we want most, we avoid most. True happiness requires that we accept the burden of our own significance. Each of us matters and each of us is here to make a difference in the world.

Key Actions for Developing Support for Change

- Make gaining acceptance that differences are key to generating new ideas, new products and services, and new levels of contribution a priority.
- Bring people with different perspectives together for problem solving and decision making to give them a firsthand opportunity to experience the value of differences.
- Solicit help from leaders with clout and influence to help you gain acceptance; lead by example together, demonstrating how to put differences to work to drive new levels of innovation and results.

Step 3—Action: Moving Forward

Taking action to put human differences to work in new and different ways isn't nearly as complicated as we sometimes make it. For the best leaders, it is a natural next step once you've gathered the knowledge and resolute belief that comes from assessment and picked the right timing by building support for change that ensures acceptance. One of the best teachers of the action step is observing and learning from those who are really skilled at bringing diverse people together and engaging them in ways that generate breakthrough thinking and new ideas that become catalysts for innovation. Some visionaries are leading the way, breaking down the barriers across cultures, differences, and distance.

In early 2004, under the leadership of Chairman and CEO Sam Palmisano, IBM took an unprecedented action step that serves as an example: called the Global Innovation Outlook (GIO), it proves that putting differences to work is the fastest way to innovation.

The breakthrough at IBM came from the recognition that the very nature of innovation has changed. It is increasingly open, collaborative, multidisciplinary and global. GIO leaped out of the IBM tradition of internal annual technology and business forecasting, turning these processes into a series of free-form conversations with the world. These gatherings attract a diverse mix of perspectives and expertise that come from business,

What we want most, we avoid most.

politics, academia, and nonprofits. Sam Palmisano describes what happens in these terms: "It's a new approach to problem-solving and it works—because the participants understand that their best ideas will only get better by being part of a larger conversation, where they can be debated, vetted, expanded, and improved."

Key Actions for Moving Forward

- Communicate with people in simple, vivid language that helps everybody want to engage and contribute.
- Refresh stagnant, internally focused processes by inviting outsiders into your problem-solving discussions; make them a rich mix of diverse perspectives.
- Put a high value on learning while doing.

Step 4—Accountability: Establishing Shared Ownership

Accountability for creating a diverse, inclusive environment that puts differences to work reaches well beyond talk and good intentions. It requires an act of commitment. We are expected to deliver. Do our part. Become involved. Set an example. Change our ways. Embrace new thinking and new people. Adjust our policies and practices—live up to the values we espouse.

Sue Swenson, president and CEO of Sage Software-North America, ranks high on the list of exemplary leaders. She offers this perspective on accountability:

Shared accountability in all aspects of our business is a fundamental belief for me. . . . The

approach I've taken as a leader is to personally take responsibility for finding ways to engage the organization—integrating fairness, openness, diversity, and inclusion into our strategies, measures, recruiting practices, new hire orientation, management training, employee development, recognition programs, and our common protocol of behaviors and expectations for everybody. What has convinced me that this approach works is the results achieved. The most gratifying part of this built-in approach is watching people embrace these principles—and do it because they find value in it.

Key Actions for Establishing Accountability

- Take personal responsibility for finding ways to engage your organization.
- Consider how and what you need to do to make sure that policies, practices, and leadership actions align with your plans to master putting differences to work.
- Set expectations for personal responsibility at all levels.
- Be the change you want to see—set the example.

Step 5—Achievement: Measuring Progress; Celebrating Success

As we work to lay a foundation for putting differences to work at a new time in history, we have to develop a new consciousness about the value of measuring progress and celebrating success. Although the benefits might be measured in innovations, leadership, high performance, and the bottom line, remember that people are the catalysts for these achievements.

The call to all of this generation's leaders—new and seasoned—is to join together to revitalize, refresh, and renew our commitment to the people-focused values that reside inside each of us. Set a few standards of conduct for yourself as a leader—standards that include a day-to-day consciousness about appreciating people—caring about them and enjoying the privilege you have to work with them.

Key Actions for Measuring Progress and Celebrating Success

- Take time to see your successes, big and small; help others do the same.
- Look beyond business results and the numbers, and honor the basics: building relationships, strengthening skills and capabilities, building proficiency at putting differences to work in creative ways.
- Establish your own conscious people-focused standards as a leader.

Step 6—More Action: Keeping Momentum Alive

Of all the six steps that make up the putting-differences-to-work cycle of action, *more action* is the step that breathes new life into the ongoing journey. It is not a destination; it is the gateway to what comes next at any phase of change. It represents the process of reflection, renewal, reenergizing, refocusing, regrouping—and recommitting ourselves and our organizations to whatever action is needed next to help us take what we've learned working together to still another level of excellence. *More action* is often preceded by what seems like a lull, a disruption, an unexpected wind that knocks us over, a pause, a place where we stand still—or at times, temporarily take a step backward for myriad reasons that we could all recite.

The economic crisis is certainly a perfect example of a situation that perhaps caught us by surprise and prompted us to find ways to help one another to ready ourselves for the next great opportunity. I've held global dialogues in recent months, putting differences to work to help organizations and individuals figure out how they can creatively address the implications of the economic meltdown. The most innovative ideas have again emerged from a diverse mix remembering what they already know how to do—rediscovering the knowledge and know-how from the experiences of overcoming hard times, tragedy, financial ruin, lost jobs, organizational downturns, reorganizations, and personal reinventions. These lessons learned are all ap-

plicable for beginning again and keeping momentum alive.

Kazuo Inamori, known as one of Japan's exemplary entrepreneurs, and founder and chairman emeritus of the Kyocera Corporation, speaks of the *more action* step when he describes the Kyocera Philosophy: "Every time you take a step forward, the next step will become apparent. In this way great things are achieved. Proceed step by step, like an inchworm. This is the way to take up the challenge of great things—not with some extravagant gesture, but with many small steps." This is also how we learn to work more efficiently, effectively, and innovatively by putting differences to work, one step at a time, one shared experience at a time, one success fueling the next with *more action*.

Key Actions for Keeping Momentum Alive

- Ask three questions: (1) What's going well that supports putting differences to work? (2) What needs renewal? (3) What have you learned that will help you use our many dimensions of differences to reach for new levels of success?
- Start a new conversation; refresh your approach; create a revitalized vision by learning from your experiences and putting new ideas into action.
- Add more diversity to the mix in the process of renewal to see what new ideas surface.

The Fastest Way to Innovation

The tried and tested perpetual cycle of action represented in these six steps provides a road map for change that will help you put differences to work as the fastest way to innovation, new levels of leadership, and high performance. The examples at each step illustrate how seemingly small investments and can result in big returns. The art of putting differences to work ultimately flips everything we have been conditioned to believe. You know: "let's put our differences aside," "we are more alike than we are unlike," "look at all we have in common." These remain valuable truths, but when we stop there, our differences are made sec-

ondary, sometimes brushed away as if they don't matter. What this overlooks is that our differences are an advantageous stockpile of kindling to ignite new ideas and breakthrough thinking—the drivers of creativity, innovation, and invention. The time for change has come—and it is calling us to look for differences, welcome them, and employ them for the good of all, consciously making differences a priority—part of the mix—for any mainstream practice, including problem solving, team building, and decision making.



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