

# HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS REAP THE BENEFITS OF A DIVERSE WORKFORCE?

## ASSESSING THE ORGANIZATION'S DIVERSITY PARADIGM

Too often, organizations focus on merely recruiting employees from different demographic groups, mistakenly hoping the benefits of diversity will magically follow. Whether or not an organization will fully benefit from diversity, however, depends on how its members answer the questions, “*What do we do with this diversity? Why do we want a diversified workforce?*”<sup>1,2</sup> Organizations must explicitly address these questions if they are to prevent diversity efforts from backfiring and if they are to reap the oft-touted benefits of better performance and productivity. Engaging in conversations about these questions is essential, then, even if such conversations initially seem time-consuming, abstract, or even ominous.

Ely and Thomas identify three different paradigms — each with different assumptions and outcomes — that can help members of organizations understand how they think about diversity (See chart on flipside.):

- > the Discrimination – Fairness Paradigm
- > the Access – Legitimacy Paradigm
- > the Learning – Integration Paradigm

The first two paradigms — the most common, to date — result in some positive outcomes but limit the benefits an organization can gain from diversity. Only the Learning-Integration Paradigm allows organizations to recognize the full potential of a diversified workforce.

### WHAT COMPANIES CAN DO

#### 1. Initiate explicit conversations about the organization's diversity paradigm.

For resources to begin such conversations see the resources listed below and the diversity paradigm chart (see flipside).

#### 2. Consider several preconditions necessary for shifting to a learning-integration paradigm.<sup>1</sup>

Assess to what extent these already exist and select the most feasible areas for improvement. (See additional resources listed below.)

- > The organization understands that a diverse workforce brings different approaches to work and that these are to be learned from not “fixed” to fit the existing norm.
- > The organizational culture stimulates personal development.
- > The organizational culture encourages openness.
- > The organization has a well-articulated and widely understood mission.
- > The organization has a relatively egalitarian, nonbureaucratic structure.

#### 3. Take a small steps approach.

Not all preconditions need to be in place at once for change to occur. The learning and integration paradigm can be approached from several angles at once and is best accomplished initially in small groups.

### RESOURCES

1. Ely, R. & Thomas, D. (2001). Cultural diversity at work: The effects of diversity perspectives on work group processes and outcomes. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 229-273.
2. Thomas, D. & Ely, R. (1996). Making differences matter: A new paradigm for managing diversity. *Harvard Business Journal*, 79-90.

For practical tools and workshops: Cornell's Diversity and Inclusion Practice Program <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/mgmtprog/dm/>; MDB Group, Inc. <http://www.mdbgroup.com/>

**ncwit.org**

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National Center for Women & Information Technology

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# ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY PARADIGMS

PARADIGM	ASSUMPTIONS & PRACTICES	PROS	CONS
<p><b>Discrimination – Fairness</b>  <i>(Assimilation model: “we’re on the same team despite our differences”)</i></p>	<p>Underlying assumption: Diversity is important because discrimination is unfair                      Discrimination is defined primarily as formal or legal barriers                      Equality is defined as “same treatment for all”; goal is “gender-” or “color-blindness”                      Remedies remove formal barriers for individuals by recruiting, retaining, prohibiting formal discrimination, etc.                      Mentoring programs focus on helping diverse employees “fit in” with established company norms                      Progress is measured primarily in terms of recruitment and retention goals</p>	<p>Often effective at increasing “the numbers”                       Promotes “fair” treatment of all, at least in terms of formal procedures</p>	<p>Gender/colorblind ideal is implausible and often invalidates diverse perspectives                       Makes it difficult to see less formal instances that result from subtle institutionalized racism/sexism                       “Diverse” employees often feel silenced                       Ignores ways that gender, race, and cultural differences might alter or shape mainstream work practices</p>
<p><b>Access – Legitimacy</b>  <i>(Differentiation model: “we’re on different teams doing what our differences help us do best”)</i></p>	<p>Underlying assumption: Diversity makes good business sense in a multicultural society                      Equality is not defined as “sameness” – does not strive for gender/colorblindness – instead, “celebrates” difference                      Diverse talent is used to expand market share and connect to broader clientele                      Employees are trained to accept difference through mentoring, diversity training (but not necessarily learn from or change because of it)                      Progress is measured primarily in terms of bottom line</p>	<p>Easier to get leader and employee “buy-in” because of connection to business outcomes                       Often succeeds in improving business outcomes/relations with diverse clientele/consumers</p>	<p>“Celebration of difference” pigeonholes people into jobs that fit their “niche” or “cultural background”                       “Diverse” employees often feel exploited                       Ignores ways that cultural differences might alter or shape the mainstream work of the organization</p>
<p><b>Learning – Integration</b>  <i>(Integration model: “we’re on the same team with, not despite, our differences”)</i></p>	<p>Underlying assumption: Diversity enhances all aspects of an organization’s work and goals                      Equality is not about gender/colorblindness or about simply “celebrating” diversity                      Organization engages diversity and expects to learn from the conflicts it creates                      Diverse perspectives are harnessed for rethinking previously taken-for-granted business practices, missions, products, markets, and culture                      Diversity programs aim to help employees view diversity as learning experience, to help them learn from conflict rather than fear or suppress it                      Progress is measured in multiple ways (e.g., demographics, business outcomes, and evidence of organizational change)</p>	<p>Often effective at increasing the numbers                       Often effective at improving business outcomes                       Often effective at innovating work processes for productivity</p>	<p>Engaging diversity and learning from conflict can make people uncomfortable                       Difficult to achieve, particularly if organizational structure is very bureaucratic and hierarchical                       Easier to achieve in smaller businesses or smaller work units</p>