

## **Diversity Is – and Isn't – the Answer**

### **Myths about Diversity**

Google “diversity” and you’ll get almost 62 million responses. Google “definition of diversity” and up will come almost 2 million responses. Talk about diversity! Do we have any idea what we’re talking about here?

Diversity is generally defined as a variety of people of mixed race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, age and so forth. Employers make huge efforts to build a “diverse workforce.” They hope to benefit from having many different life experiences, skill sets, and worldviews. Good idea!

### **Judging Books by the Covers**

The standard idea of what “diversity” is amounts to judging books by the covers. Skin color, gender, age, etc. are all surface descriptions. People may be different from each other, but it’s not necessarily because of these superficial markers. Have you noticed that even in a very diverse group of employees, the conflicts aren’t really much different than they were in the old homogenous offices?

Adam has 10 VW bugs and he paints each one a different color, he doesn't have a diversity of vehicles.

Turf battles. Power struggles. Personality conflicts. Cliques, sabotage, passive-aggressive strategies. Surface differences may hide the true nature of the tensions. They can even add a layer of complexity to the politics. But they are not where the important differences lie.

### ***The Issue is never THE ISSUE***

The important differences cut across all these surface descriptions. When it comes to working together, the important differences include a person’s values and their natural workstyle preferences. The Deep Structure of Diversity. This is where tensions and conflicts live, and where they can be resolved.

Deep Structure issues don’t show up directly. They show up as symptoms. Surface tension. The stories, and specific complaints. *The Issues*. You can listen to the stories and bend over backwards to satisfy the specific complaints, but it’s a sure bet that before long they’ll return in a slightly morphed form. Pretty soon you feel like you’re single-handedly trying to keep 10 beach balls under the water all at the same time.

Behind every behavior there is a positive intention. That intention is usually to get one or more of the Deep Structure needs – THE ISSUES – met.

*THE ISSUES* are predictable, identifiable, and resolvable. They generally fall into five categories:

- *Belonging* to the group;
- *Respect* of self and others;
- *Security* of Place and *Purpose* in the organization;
- *Opportunity* and *Achievement*; and
- *Equality* and *Inclusion* within *Long Term* thinking.

### **It's not really Personal**

Surface Structure issues are personal. Surface Structure conflicts turn volatile quickly and easily, and they don't stay resolved for long. Because, of course, they weren't *THE ISSUE* in the first place. Deep Structure issues aren't personal, they're universal. Since we all share them, we have common ground for facing these issues.

The Boss is mad because Karl is consistently late? It's probably because of the lack of respect he's showing. The wasted minutes and money are the visible evidence of a lack of respect.

When Deep Structure needs get met, Surface Structure conflicts can resolve themselves – and stay resolved. When a work group decides to look into their shared needs, to identify where they're being met and where not, and to do what it takes to find common ground, they will feel the tension and conflict softening, find a deep appreciation for each other, and find working together rewarding, and even fun.

**OK. Now what do I DO?**

First, get curious.

Imagine that each of the five categories has its own colored light, and each person has one set of lights. The lights glow brighter or dimmer according to how important each issue is to that person, based on the context and activities at the time. One will be brightest, and none will be off. They will change as circumstances change, but each person will have one or two that, over time, are consistently brightest. The consistently brightest lights can be said to show the “Center of Gravity,” the Deep Structure values that are most significant for that person.

*This matters*, because whenever a group is working together to accomplish something, a mix of skills and priorities – Deep Structure values – is needed. Groups need to determine three things in order to be effective and efficient:

- What skills and values are needed to reach the goal?
- What skills and values are available within the group?
- Who is best matched with what tasks?

People do best when they're working on tasks that come naturally. Consciously recognizing where people thrive, and giving them that kind of work, is deeply respectful as well as energizing.

Next, invest the resources it takes to identify the individual preferred work styles and the cultural values of everyone in the group. With this knowledge and understanding, support them in allocating and fine-tuning the workload to best fit the overall needs.

Then, be consistent in looking for the Deep Structure Issues whenever the group hits a speed bump. Make the Deep Structure Paradigm part of the company values.