Defining Diversity and Adapting Inclusion Strategies on a Global Scale

Lessons from the Field, for the Field

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One of the foundational questions for the field of Organization Development, and for OD practitioners, is how to ensure our work is seen and experienced as relevant wherever we practice around the globe and to ensure that individual training and experience (in our case, as United States-based practitioners) does not limit us from effectively understanding and working in other cultural contexts.

As a White woman and African-American man born, raised, and educated in the United States, we have had to navigate our own identities as we have worked both in the US and globally and adapt our theory and practice of strategic culture change to the cultural contexts in which we work. This is even more critical as our practice focuses on helping clients create higher-performing, inclusive organizations that leverage differences to be more effective in their interactions and in the marketplace.

In this article, we will share what we have learned from our work in organizations around the globe. This involves first addressing the concern that “diversity” itself is often thought of as a US concept primarily related to race and gender. We will address how we have been able to use inclusion in a culturally-sensitive way as a key to strategic culture change. With that foundation, we will illustrate how we have successfully adapted frameworks and change models.

Diversity: A Concept to Translate

Foundational to the work on diversity and inclusion has been the very concept of diversity itself. In the US, consciousness about diversity as something to be unleashed in the workplace grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and initially focused on race and subsequently gender. Over time, collective understanding of diversity has grown to include other underrepresented groups, and diversity work in some organizations is now focused on a wider range of differences, including sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, nationality, work style, and more.

In our work, we focus not only on leveraging differences, but also on conscious inclusion, knowing that is important to not only have differences in the workplace, but to enable each individual to do their best work. This means ensuring that an organization’s culture and interactions support individuals of all identities and their different perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences to contribute to enhance problem solving and innovation.

Shifting from Diversity to “Differences that Make a Difference”

No matter where we are in the world, getting the right people in the room to do the right work is critical to organizational success. This means working with the organization to think about how best to ensure people at all levels of the organization and of all backgrounds can contribute. The challenge is to understand and find out which differences make a difference.
within that country or region and how those differences play out within that organization (Miller & Katz, 2013a). Figure 1, above, refers to some of the differences that seem to make the biggest difference in how people are included—or not—in an organizational culture. This model provides an opportunity for people in the client system to consider and discuss which differences are being joined with or judged the most, thereby having the greatest impact on interactions and performance.

When working with clients outside the United States, we often encounter concerns that we will put a US lens on our work related to differences, specifically, a focus on race and gender. Our identities have also led some clients to believe we will focus on these issues. Of course, this speaks to the assumptions and frames many bring about the US and our identities, all of which need to be worked through, either directly or indirectly.

Using the “differences that make a difference” framework when entering the system allows us to begin with a larger conversation with the client about difference as we work together to identify which differences are most important within their organization and country. We have found that the reality of differences is universal—every society has some groups that hold more power than others and some history of oppression. As we engage within organizations, we also hear about the pain and barriers individuals and groups experience due to a variety of differences in addition to social identity, such as function and level.

Finding out early on what differences make a difference through these conversations with people at all levels in the organization, understanding the cultural context and organizational challenges, and using our own skills of observation has proven critical to our success in client systems globally and has enabled us to effectively address the differences that create challenges to higher individual, team, and organization performance.

For instance, as part of a change effort in a Mexico City plant, we used Conscious Actions for Inclusion (Katz & Miller, 1995/2016) (see Figure 2, next page), a model that is a foundational part of our practice, for creating common language across the organization and providing a common set of behaviors that were expected of each individual. Seeing the model for the first time, senior leaders claimed that focusing on the behaviors was unnecessary because the culture was already inclusive. The leaders indicated how they always greeted people and that they indeed had a “warm” culture. However, interviews with members of the organization clarified that while people were outwardly very friendly to one another—certainly more so than we might experience in some U.S. organizations—the leaders were not treating everyone equitably. Leaders would say hello to everyone, but gender and level in the organization determined who got the most opportunity to share their perspectives in conversations and meetings. Many people said that they did not feel safe speaking up to leaders, which led them to hold back ideas for improvement. When we shared these observations with leaders, they realized they indeed had work to do to create an environment where people felt they were listened to and it was safe to speak up to solve problems.

_Gaining Context with One Up and One Down_

To ensure we are addressing the critical differences in an organization, we must pay attention to both the national overlay and organizational narrative, including the social, historic, and political perspectives of those within the system. These shape how people relate to one another,
even if all of the participants are of the same nationality or home culture. We know from research that prejudices exist (Allport, 1954) and we all carry implicit and unconscious bias (Ross, 2014), so the question becomes, in what ways are these showing up within the organization?

These dynamics were clear in an engagement we undertook with leaders of the Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) division of a large, multinational company. The focus of the work was leadership team alignment and creating a clear strategy for moving the region forward. The group of 50 leaders included members from countries throughout that vast EMEA geography. Early on, it was clear to us that the leaders from countries in Europe interacted with leaders from African countries in ways that reinforced one-up and one-down dimensions. Similarly, there were jokes and stereotypes expressed among the European leaders about their colleagues from other European countries. While not naming that some of their challenges were due to “diversity” issues, our work needed to help them find new ways of interacting and addressing the biases that were actually holding their performance back due to a lack of trust and collaboration. Our work in creating alignment incorporated looking at the assumptions that people were making based on their worldview and breaking through some of the judgments that were being made as people had different styles and approaches to achieving their agreed-upon outcomes. As the group worked toward creating alignment of their goals and objectives, it was equally important to achieve alignment on their need to interact in more joining ways (Katz & Miller, 2013b).

Knowing there is a different worldview of barriers and challenges based on the experience of being one-up and one-down also helps drive strategies for change. For instance, when we first started working in Singapore in 1987, many Singaporeans believed theirs was a very diverse and inclusive country. However, it was clear that, despite these values, there was a pecking order within our client organization in which the Chinese held the most senior positions, people of Indian descent were next most senior, and Malaysians were most junior. Understanding these dynamics was critical to the success of our work and to the organization’s commitment to becoming more inclusive.

Laying the Groundwork for Conscious Inclusion Work

Creating a Safe Container for Working with Difference

Following understanding of the context and the ways in which differences are playing out, our next critical task is to intervene in a way that creates the container for the work we are going to do in a system. Our charge is to create a safe space and to garner the trust needed so people in the client system believe that, as consultants from another culture, we can support them in their work (Katz & Miller, 1995/2016).

As we start our engagement with clients, we know it is critical to meet face-to-face as soon as possible. Often, that is not an initial option, so we ensure that we meet via videoconference so we can see non-verbal signals and begin to establish both connection and safety for the client and for us. For many in high-context cultures, this type of connection is a critical element to establishing trust and overcoming cross-cultural hurdles (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001).

Creating a safe container is foundational in our entry into the system. Like
many OD consultants, informational interviews enable us to meet with people one-on-one or in small groups to understand the challenges they and the organization are facing and to shape our work and specific interventions. Being effective in listening is a culturally-aware practice that cannot be overvalued.

Once on the ground, we strive to spend enough time with people so that they begin to know us and feel safe telling us what is going on and what we need to know to be successful. For instance, in Singapore, the CEO and HR leader coached us on mannerisms that came across as too aggressive and helped us change how we describe “straight talk” to a more culturally appropriate “communicating clearly and directly.” Positioning is critical, so we walk around numerous times, seeing people again and again in the canteen and in their work spaces.

The process of getting to know individuals and groups in a system also provides an early forum in which people can deal with any discomfort and voice their concerns about working with US consultants so that we can address their concerns. During an engagement in the Netherlands, many of those we met with said there were issues among people, but that these were not “diversity issues” and that they were skeptical of a “US diversity” project. By framing the work as being focused on the outcome of inclusion, people were much more open to engaging and saw the value of the work that we were going to undertake. Over the years, we have found that, regardless of culture, most people want to be included, contribute, and have an environment in which they can do their best work. Our job working in any organization is to find out what that means for the people of that organization and co-create with the client how to best make that happen. Framing work around inclusion—the outcome of leveraging differences—enables people to lean in and see their self-interest in joining the effort. Once people are clear that inclusion is not just for inclusion’s sake, but rather a core element of achieving the organization’s mission, strategy, and goals and enabling them to be successful, people see the effort as having local and personal importance.

Using Oneself

Critical to working globally—and—domestically—is entering a system with a clear awareness of our own culture and our cultural and individual biases, both conscious and unconscious (Katz & Miller, 2003). When working outside of our home country, it is even more critical for us to avoid entering a system with assumptions about a common worldview and value system. We each carry our own gender, racial, national, professional identities, and other backgrounds with us and continually seek to understand the impact of our cultural identities and experiences on our behaviors and how we appear to others. Really understanding our own cultural baggage is foundational to being able to hear, partner with, and understand how others are both similar and different.

Early on in our careers, we participated in an interview process with a Singaporean company for which we were flown to London to meet with two executive leaders and a local consultant. We came prepared to share our models and approach, but instead ended up spending the day talking about our values. We were surprised that this potential client did not first want to hear about what we would do; their worldview was that if we were aligned on values, the rest of the engagement could be worked out in partnership and would be successful. This was and continues to be dramatically different from our experience working with US companies.

The same client showed us again the importance of being mindful of our own biases when conducting a session with the CEO and his leadership team of three. As part of the session, we asked the team to complete a survival-type activity in which all team members were charged with coming to consensus on the priority issues. Teams we had worked with in the United States often completed the task in about 45 minutes, but this team was still working on the task three hours later. One team member held a very different point of view about what the team needed and the rest of the team held the position that the task would not be complete until each team member was “happy” with the outcome. They approached other tasks similarly throughout our engagement, providing us with new insights about cultural differences in decision making and the true meaning of consensus.

Inclusion as Strategic Culture Change

Our clients bring us in because they need to achieve particular business objectives that will be facilitated by making inclusion critical to HOW they work. Just as engagement is an organizational value around the globe, inclusion is also an outcome organizations strive for, regardless of geography. The challenge for each organization is to determine what inclusion looks like in light of their particular business objectives.

We address the creation of inclusive interactions as an element of culture because it requires a comprehensive and targeted systems approach, tailored to the needs of the business, in which differences and inclusion are a means to achieving higher performance rather than ends unto themselves. A total systems change effort (Katz & Miller, 2016) is required to create a major shift in what is valued, who is at the table, how people interact, and how work gets done. When inclusion is the common language of the organization, people understand one another more quickly and more accurately. They have the sense of safety needed to speak up, make problems visible, and address problems quickly rather than being afraid of being seen as the dissenting voice or the bearer of bad news. As a result, problem solving and decision making are accelerated and waste is eliminated (Katz & Miller, 2013; 2009). Inclusion as a cultural element can increase productivity, profitability, engagement, and a host of other positive indicators in organizations. However, achieving it requires transforming systems—what we call an inclusion breakthrough (Miller & Katz, 2002).

The common element of this approach, regardless of where the work takes place, is opening the door to conscious inclusion to enable higher performance and sustain culture change. Opening that door involves several steps:
Selecting, educating, and supporting a core group of internal change agents who focus on accelerating culture change through peer-to-peer interaction and influence.

Conducting organization-wide education on the practice of consciously inclusive behaviors to create common language, develop skills, and leverage difference across the organization.

Implementing just-in-time coaching to enable people to effectively and quickly apply inclusive mindsets and behaviors in their teams.

Implementing tools that enable clear communication and eliminate waste in meetings and day-to-day interactions.

Sustaining culture change calls for implementing a measurement tool to hold people accountable for demonstrating consciously inclusive behaviors, identifying core business processes and metrics that would improve to a significant degree if greater inclusion existed, and revising people policies to reflect inclusive values.

If greater inclusion existed, and revising that would improve to a significant degree in our client organizations.

How measurement sustains culture change

In a recent engagement in Singapore, many of the leaders, who were expats, experienced the largely Singaporean workforce as not speaking up in team meetings or formal forums. One of the early steps in the effort was to create a cohort of change agents, a diverse group of 50 people from across the plant. The pre-session interviews we conducted with the potential participants featured very engaged conversations and we observed that people were very engaged with one another during session breaks, yet when they came together as a group, there was almost silence. We shared our observations about the silence in the room and one person remarked, “We have a lot to say, but no one wants to listen.”

The reticence the largely expat senior leadership team attributed to cultural differences was actually due to an organizational culture that made it difficult for people to speak up and rarely listened to those who did speak up. By creating space to surface this information, consciously changing the cultural norms, and creating the cohort so people knew they would not be speaking out alone, the group eventually became very active in the change process, shared their views more, and gave more and more leadership to the plant. Members of this early change agent group went on to bring issues to leadership and work for greater inclusion by ensuring their peers’ voices were heard and that issues that impacted people’s ability to contribute to organizational success were addressed.

People had lots of ideas for improvement, but found that, when they spoke, others often interrupted them, leading many to feel that their contributions were unwelcomed. A major part of the intervention was working not only with the cohort, but with the expats, teaching them skills to foster greater inclusion and truly listen to what people had to say. Once the environment shifted toward greater openness and listening, plant performance improved dramatically. The change agent group was able to extend their learnings to others through peer-to-peer leadership and helped others find their voices to share their ideas.

Another team of plant and functional leaders from China, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia (including Irish, UK, and US expats), also faced the challenge of team member reluctance to speak up. This was exacerbated by the fact the team operated primarily in English, which was a second or third language for many members of the group. Conversations would happen rapidly and in a Western cultural style, which made it challenging for Asian team members to speak up and be heard. Often, when an Asian team member sharing an idea paused to take a breath or a moment to think, another team member would cut her or him off. And, because of their challenges with English, the Asian leaders were being judged as less effective, regardless of their actual results, making them less likely to move into positions of greater leadership. While we had talked with each person prior the session and heard great thinking, much of the Asian members’ thinking was not a part of the conversation once the team assembled and interacted.

At dinner with this group after our first day of work with them, Judith was seated next to one of the plant leaders from China. She was struck by how much the woman had to say—her lively and robust conversation was nothing like her behavior in the group earlier in the day. On the second day with the group, we decided to ask each member to stand up when they talked, allowing them to physically claim space in the conversation, regardless of their facility with English. Standing signaled that they still had things to say, even if they paused to think and mentally translate. This also allowed them share their thinking without being interrupted or having conversations overlap. While standing initially seemed awkward, the impact on the quality of work and the ability to get everyone’s thinking was immense as some members of the team learned how much their colleagues had to offer and others found a new process for contributing.

Later, the team applied a similar process in conference calls, with a new norm of waiting two beats after someone shared her or his thoughts and checking that they were done speaking before someone else started to speak. They came to realize that by slowing down, they were in fact speeding up their own process of problem-solving and decision-making, which increased inclusion and helped eliminate waste in their interactions (Katz & Miller, 2010).

Adapting Approaches and Models

Effectively adapting organization development approaches and models—both ours and others’—to our client engagements outside of the US has been essential to facilitating the culture change and inclusion breakthroughs that have impacted our clients’ productivity and success. The concepts we use are basically the same globally, but how we implement our work can vary dramatically based on national and organizational contexts. By being able to adapt, flex, and create new methodologies, we have been able to address concerns about our ability as US consultants to be an effective and adaptable partner.

Our experience has been that most models and approaches can work globally...
if they are properly translated into the cultural context and are aligned with the goals of the system and people’s self-interest. They have to make sense to people—people need to see some immediate advantage to using new behaviors and changing how they interact. “Making sense” often means the proof is in seeing both short-term and long-term success achieved.

**Cultural Adaptation**

Some examples of successful cultural adaptation we have found include the following. In Japan, it was critical that members of a client system did not feel we were advocating they go against the cultural norm. One of the key cultural dynamics we have often heard in Japan is “the nail that sticks out gets hammered.” This cultural saying translates into a strong need for harmony within a group or team, which often makes people reluctant to raise issues that might be problematic. Having worked in Toyota in the US, we were familiar with a major component of the Toyota Production System that called for anyone on the production line who saw a quality issue to pull the “andon cord” and stop the line’s operations. This experience helped us bridge the gap and reframe speaking up as a practice that creates greater harmony by letting others know of an issue before it becomes a big problem for the team. This framing—for the good of the group—made people more willing to raise issues in the spirit of helping the team be better. Similarly, we used the lean manufacturing concept of eliminating production waste as a framework for considering how inclusive behaviors eliminate waste in human interactions (Miller & Katz, 2013b).

**Conclusions**

Our experiences working with clients around the globe continue to reinforce the major tenets of OD, particularly the need to constantly develop and grow ourselves as instruments of change and the importance of not only bringing our skills but also shaping and co-creating strategy with our clients. Working on differences that make a difference in each organization (locally and regionally) creates a space for the issues of difference that matter in that system to be identified and addressed. Adapting models and frameworks for change so that they are relevant to our client systems is not only a need in working globally, it is the very essence of OD work. Such adaptation requires us to constantly adjust our own attitudes, beliefs, and methodologies to the local national, cultural, and organizational circumstances. Our job as change agents is to understand, adjust to, and challenge the system and ourselves in the process. In doing so, we are able to help our clients achieve their ultimate goals while hewing to the values that are central to our practice and our field.

**References**