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Ethnocentric Organizations: Strategies to help them Shift to Polycentrism

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Greetings: My real name is Tamás András Ákos, and I am Canadian, and that's a long story, perhaps for another day. I've been concerned about intercultural relations most of my life, but it wasn't until the mid-1970s that I offered my first formal cross-cultural training session for public health nurses wanting to improve their work with Indigenous people living in a city in western Canada. Over the years I've had many opportunities to learn about these issues and I welcome an opportunity to share some thoughts with you here. I hope you find them helpful.

As some introductory comments before I read the main part of my paper I'd like to describe some assumptions, many of which may be familiar to you.

1. One's culture is invisible to one's self – I can't see my own culture; its patterns were learned by osmosis, by everyday immersion in a social context during early childhood. They have disappeared from conscious awareness, and, as E.T. Hall says¹, "control from the depths." I use my culturally learned perception system to see and make sense of the world and my place in it. My culture is the lens through which I experience the world, and for most people this lens is almost completely invisible. I usually notice things about other people's cultures only when their ways are different from my own.
2. Organizations are "cultural artifacts" – they are products of their society's culture, and are rooted in its deeper patterns. Think of a tree – you can see only half of it, the other half is underground, its roots are invisible. An organization has an invisible root system in the unconscious, hidden patterns of the culture and history of its society and of its founders.
3. I will find that the culture and patterns of an organization that is built by "my people", by my own "tribe" is also invisible or transparent to me – everything is where it is supposed to be,

¹ Hall, E. T. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976 p 42.

where I expect it to be, and it feels natural to me. I know how to make it work for me, and I usually do this without even thinking much about it.

4. Members of other "tribes" or cultural groups, however, are like "foreigners" in these organizations – they are not sure how they work, in both their formal and informal aspects, and the hidden cultural patterns are more opaque to them. They have difficulty making their "homes" in them and receiving good services from them.
5. Management scholar Edgar Schein² says that an organization's corporate culture is shaped by its founding group, its early leaders, whose personalities and beliefs spread throughout the organization and determine how the organization feels, and how it works.
6. Most organizations are founded by people who share the same culture – members of the same sub-group of a society. As such, they are often mono-cultural, or ethnocentric, usually unconsciously so: in most countries these founding leaders were not overtly racist (South Africa is certainly an exception!).
7. There are two main ways to help an organization shift from mono-cultural to many-cultural, from ethnocentric to polycentric:
 - a) Help the members of its executive group change their culture from ethnocentric to polycentric, and change its many systems and practices as a result;
 - b) Change the cultural representation of the members of the executive group – put people of various cultures in real power positions and help them all learn to have voice, to listen and respect each other, and also make the necessary changes in the organization's systems and practices.

There are challenges with both methods, and in many respects the second (b) requires change in the first (a). In Canada we've found that this change – helping executives to permanently change their culture and become polycentric – requires more than just cross cultural awareness training, and that's what the rest of my paper is about. The paper has the following sub-title:

Diversity and the Executive Suite: Awareness training is not enough

In twenty-five years of offering diversity training and organization development services I've seen hundreds of cases where the "light comes on" as learners begin to understand ethnocentrism and become committed to change, only to watch the light fade when they go back to their every-day duties and relationships at work. This sort of training has little sustainable impact on their organizations, and the glass ceiling and walls remain very much in place. In spite of two decades of equity programming, a study of minority issues in the Canadian public service found that, "...advancement to senior management and executive levels has virtually stalled."³ A VP of a large telecommunications company summed it up this way: "We're a bunch of white guys in

² Schein, Edgar H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

³ Perinbam, Lewis et al, *Embracing Change in the Federal Public Service*. Ottawa: Treasury Board of Canada, 2000.

suits – and that's a problem." He said their shareholders want to see women and minorities in senior management positions and the organization needs to make this happen.

Awareness training, by itself, won't bring that about largely because it usually deals with issues that are not central to most organizations' priorities. Linking executive compensation to diversity recruitment has had some effect, but the matter remains at the periphery of most leaders' concerns. They are reluctant to hire people just because they are members of particular groups – executives need more compelling reasons to make valuing diversity a genuine corporate priority.

Most diversity initiatives stress two main themes: productivity and social justice. The first states that organizations should be representative of the population so they are able to tap the creative potential of available talent and so they can be more productive and connect with increasingly diverse clientele in the domestic and global marketplace. The second theme is advanced by advocacy groups and legislators who want to ensure that qualified members of marginalized groups have equity of access to opportunity. They assert that inequitable systemic barriers produce pockets of poverty and exclusion that are seed-beds of alienation and unrest, and they warn that energy that is not productively engaged is likely to find destructive outlets.

Most executives and senior managers know all this – they are knowledgeable and well-intentioned people who want the best for their organizations and the societies in which they operate. One CEO's response when challenged in this area was, "What should I do? How do I make it happen?" He wanted to support diversity but was not sure how: there is interest and some energy, but results thus far have been minimal.

Why do most diversity initiatives have relatively little impact? What else needs to be included in the equation so the members of the executive suite see that it is in their organization's interest to become more representative and responsive to a changing society? How can we ensure that effective diversity-valuing policies and procedures emanate from these senior groups to influence the culture and practices of entire organizations? The issue is more complex than it may initially seem.

In any organizational change effort some positive forces encourage a system to shift in a desired direction, and others resist that change. Kurt Lewin's Force Field Analysis can be used to map the forces on either side of the line. I'll briefly describe three well-known but weak positive forces, three under-estimated powerful sources of resistance, and then three often overlooked but significant sources of influence that can foster the desired shift in corporate culture and practice.

Awareness training is an obvious place to begin, but it is a weak influencer. At the root of diversity training is a shift from ethnocentrism (a monocultural world-view) to polycentrism, a mindset that recognizes that one culture's way of doing things is not always better than another's⁴. It helps learners see that what is different is not necessarily wrong – it could simply be different, and there may be considerable value in each of these varied ways of thinking or behaving. Learning this is necessary, but it is not sufficient to prompt executives to make diversity a priority.

⁴ Sikkema, Mildred and Niyekawa, Agnes. *Design for Cross-Cultural Learning*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1987.

While this training helps people discover they have a culture which influences their communication practices, and that they see the world through a largely invisible set of rules⁵ that has been called the "software of the mind"⁶, it does not necessarily translate into changed patterns of belief and behavior on the job. If awareness were enough, the glass ceiling would be much less an issue than it is today.

Social justice, even when it is supported by legislation, is likewise a weak motivator – it is not a central factor in most executives' formal and informal reward and recognition systems. A CEO who maintains an adequate rate of return *and* fosters equity of access to opportunity will have happy shareholders. However, if the social agenda interferes with productivity the CEO will soon be in trouble. An equivalent process is present in most parts of the public sector. Equity legislation is essential, but it has not brought about sufficient change in core attitudes and behaviors.

Making optimum use of available talent is another weak motivator, especially in organizations that are relatively comfortable with their existing personnel base and workplace dynamics. Although the high tech sector with its chronic shortage of skilled personnel is often held up as an exception, there is a powerful negative factor that works against diversity at senior levels even in these systems.

This first strong negative force is a largely unconscious culturally-based cloning process that determines who has access into the upper levels of organizations. The appearance of laid-back informality in high-tech cultures belies a preoccupation with hierarchy: staff at one of the largest communications firms in Canada are quick to identify each other by their relative levels in the organization's structure, and they say their colleagues in other firms report similar experiences⁷. In this sense they are not much different than employees in most organizations who devote considerable attention to how one moves up the ladder or "gets ahead". While there is much talk of the merit principle in this process, anthropologists have described a selective cultural-compatibility based mentoring and grooming process that senior managers use to identify and promote junior-level personnel who are likely to keep the system much as their superiors have built it⁸. Comfort often overrides competence: this is a major barrier for otherwise qualified people whose gender, social characteristics or cultural traits differ from those who control the gatekeeping processes leading to senior management.

Another powerful resisting force is linked to the established patterns of relationships in a decision-making group. Whenever an on-going consultative body adds a new member there is a tendency for the group to maintain its previous mode of functioning and to assimilate the newcomer into the accustomed way of operating. If there is a sense that the newcomer will not fit into the prevailing pattern, admission is likely to be denied. Compatibility is based on social

⁵ Hall, E. T. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City NY: Anchor Press, 1976. p42.

⁶ Hofstede, Geert. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1991.

⁷ Personal communication from mature students in an International Management class at the University of Ottawa's MBA program, spring 1999.

⁸ Wolcott, Harry F. "Maintaining the System: the Socialization of a Principal" in & Barnhardt, Ray, Chilcott, John H. and Wolcott, Harry F, *Anthropology and Educational Administration*. Tucson: Impresora Sahuaro, 1979, 147-182.

characteristics more than on professional competence, and rejection is also a social function – the misfit is not likely to be included in the host of largely informal communication processes that are essential parts of the group's operations. This tendency is described in Penrose's work on the limits to growth of the firm⁹ that was later popularized as the concept of a community of practice. If the misfit is not ejected from the group, he or she is likely to quit in frustration.

A third major negative factor is often unconscious resistance to identity change. There is a natural impulse to conserve the social and institutional contexts within which one lives and thus maintain the integrity of one's structure of meaning¹⁰. Senior staff have invested much of themselves in their organizations and derive much of their identity from this membership. This has a direct bearing on diversity in organizations: identity is based in part on one's perception of self in the broader social matrix, in a web of socially-constructed "in-group" (us) and "out-group" (them) relationships¹¹. One's sense of self is threatened when people who are traditionally perceived as members of out-groups change status and become members of in-groups, or when the boundaries used to locate one's own identity are undermined. While identity change is a prerequisite for significant development¹², much of the resistance to innovation is linked to powerful and often psychologically necessary identity maintenance strategies¹³.

The weak positive motivators mentioned earlier (awareness, social justice and optimum use of human resources) are no match for the powerful resisting factors associated with cloning, group dynamics and identity maintenance described here. Other stronger influences need to be enlisted or created if there is to be any hope of increasing executive motivation to actively value diversity. In some private-sector organizations these forces may be directly linked to market share and profitability: smart global organizations know they must diversify or face bankruptcy¹⁴. Most organizations, however, especially in the public sector, rarely have such obvious imperatives: other factors need to be brought to bear to drive the shift from ethnocentrism toward polycentrism in these systems.

Fortunately, there are other powerful supportive forces, but they fall outside the scope of what is typically associated with solutions to the "diversity" problem. Three of these are: 1) a shift from command and control to participatory team-based operations; 2) operational awareness that the creative use of conflict is essential for organizational growth; and last but not least, 3) increasing awareness that change is not linear and predictable, and that principles and strategies from chaos theory must be incorporated into everyday organizational practice in a turbulent environment. The underlying changes in belief and behavior in each of these areas are essentially similar to the shift from ethnocentrism to polycentrism which is at the root of a diversity-valuing initiative.

Organizations that want to use a team-based approach need to teach leaders to trust subordinates, recognize that a variety of points of view and skills are needed to get the job done, and

⁹ Penrose, Edith T. *The Theory of the Growth of the Firm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹⁰ Marris, Peter, *Loss and Change*. London: Routledge, 1974.

¹¹ Hall, E. T. *The Dance of Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1984

¹² Goodenough, Ward Hunt. *Cooperation in Change: an Anthropological Approach to Community Development*. New York: Russell Sage, 1963.

¹³ Rogers, Everett, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 3rd ed. London: Free Press, 1983.

¹⁴ Adler, Nancy, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*. Cincinnati: South-Western, 1997.

encourage employees to achieve clearly-defined results using whatever methods suit them. Appropriate structures must be put in place, and members need adequate interpersonal communication competencies (starting with self-awareness) and a basic understanding of group dynamics to make teams effective¹⁵. The required leadership traits have a direct relationship with a diversity-valuing orientation:

The new leadership must be able to use differences in education, culture, age and the like to enhance productivity and creativity. The most effective style for this task is one suited to the leadership of equals: a style that is low key, requiring a soft voice, a high boiling point, a talent for creating consensus, and tolerance for ambiguity.¹⁶

Organizations that want to have effective self-directed teams need to provide leaders at all levels with the ability and motivation to acquire and demonstrate attitudes and interpersonal skills that are linked to managing diversity: this includes fostering a shift from a hierarchy-based identity to a more collaborative, egalitarian relationship with subordinates.

The second powerful force supporting diversity is the growing awareness that the creative use of conflict is essential for organizational survival and growth. Employees in a "Conflict-Positive Organization" do the following:

1. Members *value their diversity* and appreciate the inevitability of conflict. They look for opportunities to voice their different views and discuss frustrations and work to make their relationships productive.
2. Members seek *mutual benefit*. They understand that they have mutual interests and seek common ground. They are all committed to pursuing a shared vision and creating a work environment that is fair and facilitating for all.
3. Group members feel *empowered*. They are confident they have the mandate, opportunities and skills to manage conflict.
4. They regularly *take stock* and *reflect* on their conflict handling. They realize that becoming conflict-positive requires continuous experimenting, feedback and improvement¹⁷.

Leaders who want to tap the creative potential of the differences of approach, character, opinion or belief of their workforce need to provide employees with opportunities to learn how to implement a conflict-positive way of working. This includes effective interpersonal communication competencies, well-developed self-management skills and a genuine and rewarded respect for differences of all sorts. In so doing the organization will develop institutional structures and individual capacities that are essentially the same as those which foster a shift from ethnocentrism to polycentrism – the core of a diversity-valuing organization.

¹⁵ Francis, Dave and Young, Don. *Improving Work Groups*. San Diego: University Associates, 1979.

¹⁶ Cleveland, H. *The Future Executive*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. Cited in Moosbrucker, Jane, "Developing a Productivity Team: Making Groups at Work Work," in Jamison, Kaleel and Reddy, W. Brendan (eds.), *Team Building*. San Diego: University Associates, 1988, p 89.

¹⁷ Tjosvold, Dean, *The Conflict-Positive Organization: Stimulate Diversity and Create Unity*, New York: Addison Wesley, 1991. Emphasis in original.

A third strong supporter of the shift to a diversity-valuing organization is linked to the skills and systems needed for organizational survival in increasingly complex turbulent and unpredictable contexts. Two of the many works in this area describe human relations patterns that parallel those needed to value diversity. Ralph Stacey says that cultural pluralism is essential for survival: he states that a strongly shared or homogenous organizational culture prevents an organization from working effectively in a turbulent context:

Once a culture is strongly shared, the power of conformity makes it extremely difficult to change. Only a very insensitive or a very courageous person tries to act contrary to the culture and still remain in the group.

The great advantage of strong sharing is that it cuts down on the need to communicate. It speeds up group action and creates powerful cohesion. The great disadvantage is that the assumptions that all in the group are then making are very rarely questioned. In turbulent times, these assumptions can quickly and disastrously become out of date. Strongly shared cultures inevitably block new learning and cut down on the variety of perspectives brought to bear on an issue....

When norms are strongly shared they are shared at an unconscious level, and that, by definition, means a resistance to change. The more norms we strongly share, the more we resist changing them...

The dynamic systems perspective leads to a view of culture as emergent. What a group comes to share in the way of culture and philosophy emerges from individual personal beliefs through a learning process that builds up over years. And if the learning process is to continue, if a business is to be continuously innovative, the emphasis should be on questioning the culture, not sharing it. A dynamic systems perspective points to the importance of encouraging countercultures in order to overcome powerful tendencies to conform and share cultures strongly.¹⁸

Margaret Wheatley goes even further in describing the skills needed for survival in a turbulent and unpredictable context, in a world where Newtonian assumptions of predictability no longer apply:

To live in a quantum world, to weave here and there with ease and grace, we will need to change what we do. We will need to stop describing tasks and instead facilitate process. We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships, how to nurture growing, evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups, because these are the talents that build strong relationships. It is well known that the era of the rugged individual has been replaced by the era of the team player. But this is only the beginning. The quantum world has demolished the concept of the unconnected

¹⁸ Stacey, Ralph. *Managing the Unknowable*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992. Pp143-145

individual. More and more relationships are in store for us, out there in the vast web of universal connections.¹⁹

Organizations seeking survival in unpredictable contexts need a diverse workforce, and this diversity must be encouraged to express itself at all levels, particularly in the executive suite where key navigation principles and strategic decisions are shaped. The need to manage in a turbulent environment is perhaps one of the most powerful factors to consider in the Force Field Analysis described early in this article. By itself it should be enough to overcome the three resisting influences identified earlier.

Diversity-valuing skills address far more than intercultural awareness, social justice and smart use of available talent: they are a key element in the very survival of the organization. The excerpt from Wheatley's book describes the core of what these skills are – they are not exceedingly difficult to learn. What's needed is the executive level awareness of their importance, and consistent and demonstrated corporate commitment to support their introduction and application throughout the system.

Closing comments:

Although diversity-valuing skills can be taught, on their own they are not enough to bring about an organizational shift from ethnocentrism to polycentrism: the achievement of true equity is linked to the condition of the heart of the people in those systems. More is needed to transform the inner conditions that are at the root of prejudice and racism.

Fortunately, there is a direct link between behavior and belief, between action and attitude – they mirror each other, and changes in one will have an impact on the other. Executives who create new organizational practices will create conditions in which the hearts will be encouraged to change, fostering unity and harmony in diversity, and helping their systems shift from ethnocentrism to polycentrism. It's a matter of will, of commitment, followed by action to support any of the positive forces mentioned in this paper.

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you've found this presentation helpful. All the best in your efforts.

¹⁹ Wheatley, Margaret. *Leadership and the New Science*. p 38.