

## *Integrating Gender into a Broader Diversity Lens in Organizational Diagnosis and Intervention*

Organizations the world over are facing an unprecedented challenge to develop and manage increasingly diverse workforces. Many have begun their efforts by focusing on gender, often because women – typically white, Western women – have been first among the many traditionally under-represented groups to enter these organizations' managerial and professional ranks. This increase in women's presence has raised management's awareness of and concern over inequities between men and women employees. Although many have tried to make their workplaces fairer and more hospitable to women, few have had a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the complex role gender plays in organizational life to effect real change. In addition, raising gender issues in the workplace often surfaces other kinds of inter-group tensions and equity concerns, such as those stemming from differences in race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, sexual identity, and religion. Managers have had little guidance on how to approach these multiple concerns in a way that is integrated, yet attentive to the unique concerns of each.

Over the past ten years, we have worked with numerous organizations as they have struggled to address these issues – organizations that have approached this work with a focus primarily on gender, and those that have defined their concerns about equity in broader diversity terms. These two foci have led us into two different, but mutually informative, streams of research and consultation. In

each, a primary goal has been to help organizations change in ways that advance equity among employees and at the same time increase their effectiveness. We call this the "dual agenda" for change.<sup>1</sup> In this briefing note, we bring these two streams of organizational research and consultation together to explore why and how organizations that have already undertaken gender initiatives – or are contemplating doing so – might consider expanding them to include other aspects of identity group relations. With this more inclusive approach to the dual agenda, we are suggesting that managers attend to multiple aspects of identity – race, ethnicity, class, and nationality, for example, as well as gender – as the bases for organizational diagnosis, experimentation, and learning.

**Diversity in Organizations: A Conceptual Framework.** In the course of our work, we have witnessed a variety of diversity initiatives that managers have undertaken in the hopes of increasing organizational effectiveness. Unfortunately, these initiatives, though often successfully increasing gender, racial, ethnic, or national representation in the workforce, have failed to deliver fully the anticipated benefits. Indeed, increased diversity sometimes heightens tensions among employees, actually hindering the organization's performance. In those few organizations that have achieved increased effectiveness through diversity initiatives, however, we have found leaders who understand that to reap the benefits of diversity they

must create work environments that enable and encourage all of their employees to contribute their fullest potential. This means having leaders who are willing to listen, reflect upon and challenge their own hidden assumptions and work practices, experiment with new ones, and change.

The logic that underlies this approach to diversity parallels what we have called a "Frame 4" approach to gender equity.<sup>2</sup> In this approach, we start from the premise that organizations are inherently gendered.<sup>3</sup> Having been created largely by and for men, dominant assumptions, work practices, norms, and patterns of work tend to reflect masculine experience, masculine values and masculine life situations. As a result, much of what we have come to regard as normal and commonplace at work tends to affect women and men differently. Our approach to gender takes this idea as its starting point and identifies ways in which seemingly neutral work practices, work patterns, and assumptions inadvertently, but systematically, disadvantage women and prevent both men and women from bringing their whole "selves" to work.

For example, in one organization with which we have worked, career development practices systematically and cumulatively affect women and men differently. Senior managers take seriously their responsibility for grooming employees for leadership positions and deliberately give career development opportunities to both men and women



they have identified as potential leaders. At the same time, those selected face strong norms to "never say no" to these opportunities. Although ostensibly gender neutral, these practices and norms have not resulted in the same outcomes for men and women. Given

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deeply entrenched gender stereotypes in our society, women tend to receive developmental assignments that are more people-oriented, whereas those men receive are more strategic and operational.

While both types of assignments are important, women's are less visible and valued and are therefore less likely to position them for leadership roles. In this way, the seemingly neutral practice of providing developmental opportunities for potential leaders, together with the norm of "never saying no," ultimately disadvantage women.

Our analyses of the mechanisms that produce gender inequities also show, however, that gender does not necessarily operate in uniform ways across all organization members. The above example is drawn primarily from the experiences of white women and men. To assume otherwise fails to consider fully how gender operates in this organization. "Women" and "men" are not monolithic categories: The nature of privilege and disadvantage that men and women experience are structured in large measure by other aspects of their identity, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual identity, and class background. As the above example suggests, women can be systematically disadvantaged through the differential allocation and accounting of work. They tend to do a disproportionate share of behind-the-scenes work that is often discounted or made invisible.<sup>4</sup> The nature and amount of invisible work, however, may be different and differentially costly for white women and women of color. Women of color often spend

enormous amounts of time perfecting their work in order to defend against being labeled "not truly qualified." This is a time-consuming and particularly stressful form of work that is rarely seen. It is distinct from – and is done in addition to – the invisible relational forms of work that white women often perform.

Broadening the focus of analyses of gender to include these other aspects of identity recognizes that organizations are not simply gendered; they are, for example, raced and classed as well. They are typically created by and for a relatively homogeneous group of people – not for all men, but for particular kinds of men: straight, middle and upper-middle class men, who tend to be white and from the industrialized countries of the world. As a result, accepted ways of doing work – framing tasks, communicating ideas, building teams, reaching goals, and leading – tend to reflect and support an even narrower set of experiences and life situations than a gender analysis alone would suggest. This keeps marginal many groups who are outside the "mainstream" – women, people of color, people from non-industrialized countries, poor and working-class people. In both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the organization systematically ignores, dismisses, or otherwise devalues the knowledge and perspectives that all of these groups bring about how to do work – knowledge and perspectives that are often important and competitively relevant, but that may deviate from the accepted "wisdom" that has traditionally prevailed. These are the forces that create what are essentially "monocultural" organizations – despite multicultural workforces.<sup>5</sup> And this is why most organizations fail to reap the benefits of their diversity.

What those in more truly multicultural organizations have understood is that the organizational benefits of diversity – whether the result of differences in gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, or some other aspect of people's identity

– are inherent in the varied perspectives and approaches to work that members of different identity groups bring by virtue of their different life experiences.<sup>6</sup> That is, members of traditionally marginalized groups are in a unique position to help their organizations grow and improve by challenging basic assumptions about the organization's strategies, practices, and procedures. In doing so, these people are able to bring more parts of themselves to the workplace and identify more fully with the work they do. The result is a more equitable distribution of power and opportunity across members of different identity groups and a more effective organization overall.

**Advantages of Moving from Gender to Diversity.** When moving to a broader diversity lens, gender becomes one lens among many through which to view the organization critically. This move to multiple lenses creates important opportunities for learning, especially for organizations in which multiple aspects of identity are salient, as when status differentials in the workforce fall along racial, ethnic, or national lines. It has been our experience that when we focus our diagnosis exclusively on gender in these organizations, we inevitably make visible those policies, practices, and values that have systematically created inequities between other identity groups as well. Ignoring these not only limits the value of the diagnosis; it can actually undermine the gender initiative as well. We therefore see several advantages to explicitly addressing these additional identity concerns.

First, attending to the ways in which the organization has systematically devalued people from different racial, ethnic, or national groups provides a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of power in the organization and, thus, increases the possibilities for organizational learning, change, and renewal. With this broader focus, the organizational diagnosis can identify the dominant work practices and assumptions that sustain not only male privi-



lege but white, Western, heterosexual privilege as well. For example, in one international organization, we discovered that implicit assumptions about what conveys competence – Western-style machismo, athletic ability, and an aggressive, outspoken manner – virtually ensured that those who would rise to the top of the organization would fit the image of the stereotypical white, heterosexual male between the ages of 30 and 50. Not surprisingly, this organization was wasting a good deal of talent – talent that was packaged in the bodies and behaviors of those who did not fit this image.

Second, this approach can deepen the gender analysis. It can reveal how aspects of identity, such as race and ethnicity, shape some women's experiences in the organization differently from others. For example, a project that initially focuses on the segregation of jobs and opportunities by gender may immediately uncover a further pattern of segregation based on race or ethnicity. In one such organization in the United States, we observed that although women of all ethnicities had difficulty moving ahead, the patterns of derailment were different for white women and women of color. In particular, stereotypes about white women – that they are organized, efficient, and productive – kept them in front-office, nine-to-five, staff jobs. In contrast, stereotypes about women of color – that they are less productive but more willing to work non-traditional hours – kept them in equally low-level staff jobs, but doing the kinds of behind-the-scenes, around-the-clock work that the organization ostensibly required to keep it running smoothly. Needless to say, these two forms of "ghettoization" had different impacts on the two groups of women. Although both groups were essentially sealed in dead-end jobs, these placements created more child care problems for women of color than for white women, whose nine-to-five jobs made it easier for them to rely on traditional child care arrangements. Women of color were absent

from work more often than their white counterparts because of the difficulties they had finding reliable, affordable child care during their work hours, which further reinforced the perception of them as less efficient and less productive.

Third, by attending to multiple aspects of identity, this approach facilitates a more inclusive change process. More narrowly defined gender initiatives can incite resistance from marginalized men – for example, men of color – who fear that these initiatives will make invisible their own particular identity-related concerns. Similarly, we have found that a singular focus on gender often places pressure on women who embody multiple, marginalized group identities, such as women of color, to make an impossible choice: either they ally with other women and support the gender efforts or they ally with marginalized men and resist. Either way, they risk alienation from one group or the other. These women often fail to reap the benefits of their organization's gender initiatives, or worse, feel pushed further to the peripheries of the organization. We have found that using multiple identity lenses can obviate these problems and lead to changes in work practices that more effectively engage and empower all members of the workforce.

Finally, working in one domain of identity can inform and spark insights for work in other domains. We have learned that our work in organizations takes different forms, has different emphases, and involves different conversations depending on which aspect of identity is focal. This is due in large part to the historical and social differences that characterize different kinds of inter-group relations. For example, in many cultures, relations between men and women are historically rooted in the home and family, and, as a consequence, social interactions are relatively varied and frequent. By contrast, in many cultures, relations between blacks and whites are historically rooted in slavery

or colonialism, and social interactions are relatively limited. As a result, people have developed different ways of understanding and speaking about different groups. This shapes what we know – or think we know – about ourselves and each other. And this, in turn, sets the parameters for how we talk about our experiences in organizations and the extent to which we can imagine alternatives. By examining organizations through multiple lenses we can broaden these parameters, deepen our inquiry, and enhance our learning.

For example, although many of the processes that reproduce gender inequities in organizations remain stubbornly opaque, men and women find it relatively easy to define masculinity and femininity and describe how their organization differentially values the attributes associated with each. By contrast, discussions of race tend to be more difficult. In particular, white people struggle to describe the experience of whiteness, even in stereotypical terms, since they take their whiteness for granted. Unlike other racial groups, they have not learned to think of their racial identity as a distinct cultural or social experience. Nevertheless, we know from our work on gender that the tendency to see dominant groups' values, experiences, and life situations as "normal" can preclude the possibility of challenging and changing these. This perpetuates inequities and inhibits organizational learning. This suggests that, although it may be difficult, it is important to focus on the experience of racial or ethnic group privilege if the organization is to gain insights into the subtle elements of dominance that keep inequities along multiple dimensions of diversity in place.<sup>7</sup>

**How to Move from Gender to a Broader Diversity Lens.** How can one advance equity in a way that also advances learning and attends to the experiences of all members? One way to approach this work, regardless of the lens with which one begins, is to look



at the specific ways in which an organization's dominant assumptions, work practices, and work patterns lead to ways of working that privilege members of a dominant group while systemically disadvantaging others. In most traditional organizations, this critique would surface how generally accepted and unquestioned ways of working – ways that appear to be neutral in their impact on employees – may be easier for some groups to adopt than others, whether these favored groups be whites, men, heterosexuals, Westerners, those from the middle and upper-classes, or some combination of these. Moreover, it may surface alternative ways of working that are more effective, even for those favored groups.

To engage in this kind of work, an organization must make a commitment and be open to learning from relevant identity based differences. Members must view challenges to conventional wisdom as an opportunity, a starting point for identifying potentially more effective alternatives. For example, many organizations' first line of response to glass ceiling problems is to train women to function more effectively within their traditionally masculine cultures. It is often women of color who resist this approach most vociferously, because they tend to be less "wedded" to that culture.<sup>8</sup> This resistance may call attention to the limitations of training as a strategy for developing and advancing women generally – not just women of color. In this way, the experiences and insights of women of color can benefit the whole organization. This process of learning from difference involves the active engagement of all parties in critical reflection on their own assumptions and practices, with the ex-

plicit intent of developing alternative ways of working and thinking about work that are both more equitable and more effective.

**Conclusion.** Whether addressing gender or broader diversity concerns, our experience suggests that there are at least four preconditions for ensuring that such initiatives fulfill their very rich promise.<sup>9</sup> First, it is essential that the organization's leaders recognize the different perspectives and approaches to work that a diverse workforce embodies and understand that these present both learning opportunities and challenges for the organization. Second, the organization's culture must encourage openness and support constructive debate and conflict on work-related matters. These will inevitably arise in the course of these change efforts, but they are important opportunities for learning and change. Third, the organization's mission should be clear and widely understood among employees. This will center learning and change processes on the accomplishment of the organization's goals. And finally, the organizational culture must create an expectation of high standards of performance from everyone. For staff diversity to fully contribute to strengthening organizational performance, the organization must believe that all its members can and should contribute fully.

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<sup>1</sup>For examples of dual agenda approach, see Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J., and Kolb D. (1997). "Unexpected Connections: Considering Employees' Personal Lives Can Revitalize Your Business," *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 11-19; and Meyerson, D. and Kolb, D. (forthcoming). "Moving Out of the Armchair: A Framework that Bridges the Gap between Feminist Theories and Practice," *Organization*.

<sup>2</sup>See Kolb, D., Fletcher, J., Meyerson, D., Merrill-Sands, D., and Ely, R. (October 1998). "Making Change: A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in Organizations." *CGO Insights*, No. 1. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons Graduate School of Mgmt.

<sup>3</sup>Acker, J. (1990). "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 4, pp. 139-158.

<sup>4</sup>Fletcher, J. (1998). "Relational Practice: A Feminist Reconstruction of Work," *J. of Mgmt Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 163-186.

<sup>5</sup>Cox, T. (1993). *Cultural Diversity in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, D. and Ely, R. (1996). "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, pp. 79-90.

<sup>7</sup>See Ely, R. (1995). "The Role of Dominant Identity and Experience in Organizational Work on Diversity," in S. E. Jackson and M. N. Ruderman (eds.), *Diversity in Work Teams: Research Paradigms for a Changing Workplace*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 161-186. Also see Hurtado, A. (1996). *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>8</sup>Hurtado, A. (1989). "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color," *Signs*, Vol. 14, pp. 833-855.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas, D. and Ely, R. (1996). "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, pp. 79-90.

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