Keeping a diverse work-force: more than glossy rhetoric?

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Introduction

"We seek a richly diversified experience where every difference strengthens and reinforces the other" (Follett, 1924, p. ix).

Much literature on diversity and leadership find that diversity is a comforting word giving outward legitimacy for companies while in the practical internal life of the organization, diversity is perceived as a disturbance. When aiming for smooth effectiveness and comfortable harmonious work-days, real diversity is not often found to be given priority (Berg & Kvilekval, 2011; Prasad, 1997; Yukl, 2010).

The main objective of this paper is to explore the term 'diversity' as seen from the leadership perspective, to possibly serve as a resource and frame of reference for leaders of diverse workforces and students of leadership. Secondly, I aim at drawing an outline as to why a diverse workforce, when managed wisely, serves to enhance the purpose of the organization or company. However, making diversity a true asset would for many of us remain a utopia, inherently not achievable in practical organizational life (Kumar, 1991; Levitas, 2001). In an attempt to make the idea of integrated diversity becoming more practical, the third objective is to present and discuss the Diversity Icebreaker – a tool, which could enable leaders with the how-to and insight into some possible implications for the execution of leadership. The last objective is to outline which implications it could pose for leaders to attempt to transform diversity to a true asset.

As a starting-point, I use the ground-breaking works of Mary Parker Follett, who as early as the 1920's explored how leaders could develop institutions of integrated diversity, utilizing the difference of the workforce in giving their best for the common purpose, instead of encouraging conformity and sacrificing the traits that make each one special.

The basis of my literature material is the article *Communities of Creative Practice: Follett's Seminal Conceptualization* by Novicevic, Harvey, Buckley, Wren & Pena (2007); along with Follett's original article *Creative Experience* from 1924. In elaborating on Follett's concepts I use various theoretical material drawn from the social sciences, in particular cultural anthropology and management literature.

A dialectic approach

"Compromise sacrifices the integrity of the individual, and balance of power merely rearranges what already exists; it produces no new values" (Follett, 1924, p. ix)

Mary Parker Follett describes how leaders could transform a diverse work-force from being an irritating grain of sand, into becoming a precious pearl for the organization. She outlines how a company could evolve from a situation of sub-optimal fragmented diversity into a state of unified innovation adding value through integration of differences, not by compromise or by assimilation (Novicevic et al., 2007). Follett thus draws a picture of a process similar to the structure of Hegel's dialectical model.

The philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) provided a conceptual framework for understanding how a specific type of communication between people could lead to even better truths, understandings, reasoning and consciousness, as well as better practices in organizations and society in general. In a very simplified and short version, the dialectic approach outlines a process whereby the present position (thesis) will be challenged by its negation (anti-thesis), through which the understanding of the

issue transgresses into a higher entity of integration (synthesis). The third stage represents an ever better and higher conscious-ness for those involved and is not to be confused with the sum of the parts (Haga, 2002; Skirbekk & Gilje 1987). An example of Hegel's model could be the Norwegian social democratic state, being neither a pure capitalism (thesis) nor socialism (anti-the-sis), but a third way (synthesis) of state organizing principle in-corporating elements of both the others.

In the following, in using the stages of a simplified Hegelian dialectic, I will examine and thereby try to explain Follett's work on how her particular Communities of Creative Practice can come about in an organization (Follett, 1924; Novicevic et al., 2007).The first section addresses my understanding of what di-versity is as well as looking into why a converted diversity would benefit organizations and companies. The main part of the second section seeks to convey a possible array into how to accomplish "unified diversity" by describing and discussing the Diversity Icebreaker. In the third section I elaborate on whether Follett's synthesis of differences – unity without uniformity – is to remain a utopia or if it could be achievable in practical organizational life, and what the implications for leadership would be. Thus, in the next section I look at how the "untapped" organizational reality of diversity could look like.

Figure 1

THESIS —— opposed by —— ANTITHESIS

which is reconciled
with the thesis in a

SYNTHESIS
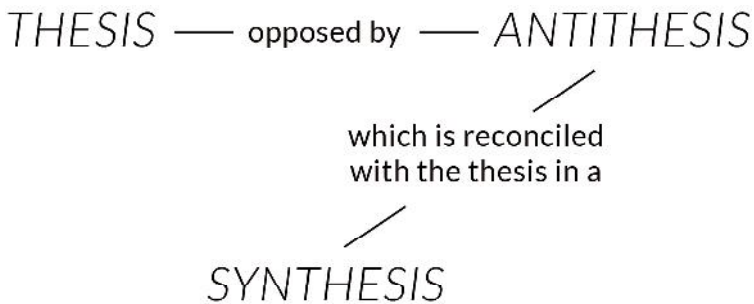
Exploring the first stage: knowledge regimes and diversity untapped

"If I think I am looking at a black snake and you think you are looking at a fallen branch, our talk will be merely chaotic" (Follett, 1924, p. 6).

A common way of defining and thinking about diversity is to see it as difference regarding physical and social traits, such as age, gender, skin colour, ethnicity, nationality, physical ability, spoken language abilities, sexual orientation, socio-economic background and religious, ideological, and political beliefs. These traits are often playing a fundamental role in shaping organizational reality, and in many work-places and social situations they will be "a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972). However, in adhering to the writings of Mary Parker Follett, in this paper diversity is viewed as coming into play when the employees belong to various knowledge regimes. Each knowledge regime is comprised of individuals with similar education and institutional experience, wherein the physical traits listed above may or may not be relevant. The concept of knowledge regimes provides an understanding of deep-run differences between individuals and groups.

Regimes of knowledge can be seen as fields of understanding and communication of both verbal and non-verbal signs. They constitute cognitive models for thinking, and – within these regimes – there are conceptions of how the good life looks like, what the important and relevant facts are, how a problem is to be solved, and what the preferred results are (Danielsen, 2008; 2012; Foucault, 2004; Sand, 2004).

Knowledge regimes thus guide people in how to think about others and how to think about themselves as the social structures are internalized and institutionalized and the production of truth made self-evident. These socially constructed perceptions of oneself and others and of right and wrong are rationalized and they become "natural" and taken for granted. They become part of the universe of the not discussed, what by Bourdieu (1977) is

termed the "doxa". The power structures of the "doxa" will determine not only how the different members of society are viewed and categorized by each other, but also how they view themselves and place themselves in hierarchies of values.

Different forms of knowledge give different forms of legitimacy and operate around different criteria for validity. Confronted with others' regimes validity criterion, types of power, legitimacy and authority, can represent a threat to the system's own values, belief systems and ideals, and set into play the dynamics of us-them-dichotomies, with the effect of harnessing the perceived differences of the "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1993; Sirnes, 1999). Furthermore, resources may not be transferable from one system to another. What provides legitimacy, power, and authority in one system may not be convertible (Danielsen, 2008; Foucault, 2004; Sand, 2004).

The systems are seen to exist as parallel entities rather than as being intertwined. They evolve self-referentially and autonomously around their own codes and operate around their own rationality. As such, there is not any real understanding between them. Individuals are not necessarily exchanging views and perceptions or if they are, they are really not getting the full depth of meaning of the other. Concepts and language may not be given the same meaning in the various systems, and the same practical phenomenon may have different descriptions in various systems. At the same time, the use of language and concepts within these regimes structure thinking and perception of reality, and would rarely be neutral (Danielsen, 2012; Sand, 2004; Sirnes, 1999).

Examples of such regimes are found in Danielsen's (2008) research on international crisis management where one such knowldge regime is connected to those trained within the army structure and another within the diplomatic world and so on. At the same time, the more "superficial" demographic traits as listed earlier on in this section are not found to play a decisive role in the formation of groups. Instead, the doxic fields directs the problem-solvers' attention in different directions, for instance when the key concepts are given different meaning by the various

participants. Establishing some common fields of understanding around the key concepts, tasks and purposes would consequently be necessary to bring the scenario from one of dysfunction to one of conflict resolution. The likely outcomes of keeping the different competencies and ways of approaching the problem concealed would in this example lead to a disaster.

The same principles that are at play in the training situation of international high crisis management can be claimed to hold true for any company or organization going about their short- and long-term activities. The importance of allowing conflicting views to be voiced in order for any kind of organization to succeed is underlined by "learning organization" and management literature stressing the importance of creating a culture of candour and transparency (Bennis, Goleman & O'Toole, 2008; Fiol, 1994; Senge, 2006; Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003). Therefore, exploring this example brings a comprehension of why leaders of diverse workforces have good reasons to go into the challenging work of transforming this situation of the "thesis" stage.

Strategic flexibility seems to be needed as many companies face complex environments and changing circumstances. Leaders are challenged in that the tasks cannot be solved one-dimensionally to produce the best value possible. Strategic flexibility implies taking in the different voices and creativity of a range of people belonging to various knowledge regimes. Solutions, innovations, and ability to reach out to various stakeholders and client groups, and thereby the company's ability to create added value improve to a great extent when diversity is actually activated and made relevant. Diversity thus comes up as a necessary device for leaders in order to solve tasks, create new values, and accomplish objectives (Busch, Vanebo, Klausen & Johnsen, 2005; Novicevic et al., 2007).

Leaders would need to have the capability of recognizing and bringing up on the table the "invisible truths made self-evident" in order to make full use of the differences and expertise. In the next section, I present and discuss how leaders of diverse work-forces

can help to bring about the awareness of 'taken-for-granted as-sumptions' in the company.

Exploring the second stage: awareness-raising, similarity and difference

"Compromising with the old, keeps us always with the old" (Follett, 1924, p. 160).

According to Follett, leaders of diverse workforces have the option of transforming a situation of fragmented diversity into one of a co-operative action, given there is an organizational culture characterized by tolerance and trust (Follett, 1924; Novicevic et al., 2007). However, while Follett is providing a theoretical framework for showing the way towards integration of difference, we are still left somehow as 'question-marks' regarding the 'how-to'. How do leaders, in the practical organizational reality, do the purposeful meddling through introducing a contrast, an "anti-thesis", to transport a situation of deep-run us-them dichotomies and non-translatable social codex, to communities of creative practice and integrated diversity?

One possible tool that could assist leaders in developing diversity to a true asset is the Diversity Icebreaker. The tool consists of five phases. The first phase is a preference test, a self-scoring questionnaire comprised of fourteen questions, each comprising of three statements, where the participants distribute six points between the three statements as to which of them describes them best. In the end of this phase, it is revealed which statements correspond to which of the three categories – Red, Blue or Green – each describing a set of characteristics. These characteristics are connected to personal traits as well as to ways of perceiving tasks and how one thinks about problem solutions. Although each person typically scores higher on one of the colours, each one will have elements of all the categories. This demonstrates one's own internal diversity as well as similarity with the other main colour groups. It thereby points towards the potential of this tool to bring about an understanding of connectedness and shared

interest between oneself and others (Ekelund, 2012; Orgeret, 2012; Symposium, 2012).

In the second and the third phases of the Diversity Icebreaker, the participants are placed together in groups based upon which colour they had the highest score on. These groups are asked to describe what characterizes them and the other two groups, then write this on a flip chart and present it to each other. They are encouraged to be more open and outspoken than they normally would. As described by various case-studies (Human Factors, 2015), this process creates spontaneous discussions between the groups, each defending its own "identity" and at the same time resisting the labels put upon them by the other groups. This phase would also often have a quality of humour and laughter, softening the atmosphere. For example, the Blue group would typically describe themselves as being task-oriented, rational and focused but resists being called 'unsocial'. In their turn, the Blue could label the Red as impulsive scatterbrains, but good in making new friendships.

It can be drawn from this that the use of the Diversity Icebreaker can help in unmasking taken-for-granted traits and bringing the fields of the "doxic" up for discussion and by this mapping diversity of the entity. Also, through the words and language the groups use to describe self and others, it could be revealed how the groups put value on certain personality traits and what traits give authority and respect. The Diversity Icebreaker could therefore contribute to a better understanding of the rationale of actions for oneself and for "the others".

The fourth and fifth phases of the Diversity Icebreaker consist of a debriefing discussion, inviting the participants to deeper-run reflections upon what just took place. Case studies on the use of this tool in multi-cultural settings show that plenary reflection helps to build an understanding that all the colour groups possess vital resources for ensuring success. The seminar thus brings about a new insight of interdependence and connectedness having the potential of replacing the 'us-them' dichotomies

and re-evaluating collective definitions (Ekelund, 2012; Human Factors, 2009; Orgeret, 2012; Symposium, 2012).

The debrief seminar can also include a discussion about how to go on, i.e. continue after the workshop in their daily teamwork, interaction practices, etc., given the new insights this tool has helped providing. The leaders could facilitate this by raising questions for the participants to discuss, like: "What labels and wording have influenced our interaction in a way that harms co-operation?" or "How can we build a shared platform for understanding and develop new language that works better to serve the purpose of the organization?". A collective empowerment could be a potential result of these final phases of the seminar, as all employees are involved in shaping a new conceptual reality around which they could mould consciousness and develop new meanings as to how differences are to be talked about, appreciated and dealt with (ibid.).

If we picture a Diversity Icebreaker seminar applied in a multinational crisis management task-force we described earlier (Danielsen, 2008), we could make an assumption that through introducing an anti-thesis disturbing the status quo of the situation of the "diversity untapped"-thesis (by conducting the DI seminar); the leaders could kick-start their team into better performance and problem-solving capacity. It would be likely that the team members would become more at ease in making their unique contributions, and there would be a better understanding of how to reach common definitions of what the problem is. However, in assuring long-lasting practical results it is likely that even more continuous and focused hard work from leaders and employees alike would be needed.

Exploring the Third Stage: Co-creating New Diversities

"The activity of co-creating is the core of democracy, the essence of citizenship, the condition of world-citizenship" (Follett, 1924, p. 302).

In outlining her model of Communities of Creative Practice, Follett (1924) is describing a pluralism where the different groups, the knowledge-regimes, are allowed to co-exist in parallel, but where there is established a new field for understanding and communication regarding the purpose of the company. The synthesis of the different knowledge regimes is what Follett describes as "Unity without Uniformity"; an integration of differences preserving the uniqueness of each individual (Novicevic et al., 2007). To illustrate Follett's theory, we can make use of the *Team Flower*, a group exercise often used with the Diversity Icebreaker (see Chapter two, p. 48, ibid.).

In the example of the international crisis team as described by Danielsen (2008), one petal in the flower would represent, for instance, people trained within the diplomatic services, another trained in the army structure, a third the operating force of emergency communications and so on. The core of the flower would be the negotiated new diversity, being the agreed upon lowest common denominator, a shared understanding of the purpose and the key concepts (Ekelund & Rydningen, 2008).

Figure 2

Follett (1924) argues for the importance of people expressing their various views through their actions and language. This implies the allowance for value clashes in the organization, and for some kinds of fundamental substantial disagreements that could not, and should not, be agreed upon (Berlin, 1991; Novicevic et al, 2007). As such, and as illustrated above, it is possible to preserve the individual's integrity, as keeping an illusion of perfect harmony could lead to making the individual's unique traits superfluous, hollowing out human dignity and individual moral responsibility towards oneself and others (Auestad, 2005).

Furthermore, Follett argues that it is the confrontation that brings about re-evaluation of one's own practices and thus also the development and growth of oneself and the group. Thus, when people are confronted with their own prejudice and the judgments of others, as well as seeing the similarities, one is not only made aware of blind spots and presumptions, but one is also given the opportunity to revise them (Paige, Oldfield & Urstad, 2008). Consequently, being a good leader of diversity will imply some form of transformational leadership (Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011).

Critics and researchers on knowledge regimes considering this naïve and utopian, and in some ways they may be right, as leaders attempting to go into a process of creating unified diversity would meet challenges. Follett is nevertheless presenting for us an ideal that may be worth striving for. As Moylan stated, utopias have the quality of inspiring us to reach beyond what we have used to find rational and possible, thus igniting change towards better social realities (1987). To be a good leader of diversity and attempt to move the diverse work-force in the direction of "synthesis" and "unified diversity", one needs to practice as one practices in other fields, in as many and as complex scenarios as possible (Danielsen, 2008). Leaders must be trained in answering questions they have not raised and listen to constructive suggestions, instead of dismissing views opposing their own as "noise" or matter out of place (Douglas, 1966).

Follett stresses that leaders of a process of co-creating a common space of language and understanding have a task in seeing to it that this new commonality help to fulfil the purpose of the organization, through producing "shared institutions, which become individual and group norms, rules, and routines" (Follett, 1924; Novicevic et.al., 2007, p. 376). In other words, what Follett is describing, is the art of institutionalizing – it is the process of moving an organization beyond technical efficiency towards integrity and identity (Selznick, 1957). Leaders of diverse work-forces are the ones to make the decisions critical for the company, as in setting goals and seeing to it that building of purpose is taking place. In a situation like this, leaders not only would need to make use of the unique attributes of the diverse individuals and groups, they would also need to give a direction towards a common ground of language and concepts – to create a new knowledge, becoming an integrated part of the consciousness and cognitive model of the participants. Also, in this institutionalizing process, the importance of myth-making is stressed (Follett, 1924; Selznick, 1957).

It ought to be underlined that the process of co-creating a new narrative that is to function as a unified field of common understanding is a time-consuming process requiring focus and skills. It is generically slow, due to several factors (Selznick, 1957; Danielsen, 2008):

- Trust, respect, and recognition are all processes taking place in relations between people, and cannot be forced; they must be developed incrementally.

- Change of people's way of thinking, working together and communicating are time-consuming processes.

- Change of power-structures and taken-for-granted presuppositions will be met with resistance. It will often be seen as a threat to the truth.

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- Challenging existing dogmas, doctrines and discourses is rarely cherished in its time. The process of establishing new understandings and practices can often pose problems.

Even if using of the Diversity Icebreaker cannot cast a magic spell nullifying these inertias of the system, it could, when used in a well-crafted process, help in institutionalizing Communities of Creative Practices. It can do so by reinforcing metaphors and assist in developing mental models collectively for living and working together. In line with Follett's arguments of involvement, the Diversity Icebreaker utilizes the fruitfulness of bottom-up processes and collective reflection so as to co-create new, bearing metaphors, organizational narratives, language and self-understanding (Ekelund, 2012; Orgeret, 2012; Symposium, 2012).

Through this short paper, we have seen that striving for conformity among the work-force is not the path to follow for organizations wanting to thrive. Instead, there is a need for leaders to recognize spot-on the differences that makes a difference, so as to map the diversity in their organization. Bringing out into daylight the otherwise hidden assumptions and prejudices of various knowledge regimes provides a possibility for a more open dialogue. Furthermore, there is a need for activating each participant's unique knowledge, skills, value-system and approach for succeeding in properly solving the complex tasks. The difference must be voiced as well as mutually understood. Here within lies perhaps the most intriguing challenge for leaders of diverse work-forces: to establish and reinforce a common ground for understanding and conceptualization of purpose and methods, so that co-creating in a unified diversity actually can take place.

Author's note

This present article was initially written due to an internship in a consulting firm The Performance Group in Oslo. On my first day at the company I participated in a seminar about the Diversity Icebreaker. I was fascinated by its universality and its potential to bring about new understanding and consciousness. With great

thanks to The Performance Group for time and devotion, for giving me an assignment on my favourite subject, and for introducing me to both the Diversity Icebreaker and to Mary Parker Follett.

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