

Valuing Diversity – The Power to Create Synergy in a Complex World

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Introduction

The programme of discussions over the next three days is a well considered one and reflects a diversity of issues of practical importance to both the occupational therapy profession specifically, and the nation in general. I am here to share my views on the important subject of diversity, not as an authority on the matter but as one who continues to grapple with it in my own life situation.

People value that which they deeply care about and it is no different with diversity. People who value diversity are people who care about differences that matter in human life. My own sense is that diversity is about our mental outlook and emotional disposition regarding the meaningful differences of many kinds in the many life settings in which we find ourselves: parent-child, rich-poor, female-male, young-old, innovative-conventional and so on.

Valuing diversity matters because it creates balance. Social balance within the context of the workplace is social capital in that it leads to healthy and productive interpersonal relationships between professionals, their clients and the management of the organisations within which they conduct their professional work. At face value, work behaviour and relationships occur mostly in autopilot in that they are automatic and arise from conditioned expectations. This might create the misconception that professional people share common understandings and care about common values. Therefore, there is not much need to pay attention to differences. This would be in order if it did not often amount to denial of differences. The similarities between people that are a problem, it is the differences that matter. Either these underlying differences are managed with care or we are not sensitive to them.

Within the professional working space, we may expect people to leave diversity at the door — after all, we are professionals. Our job is to get on with our task. Yet people are the poorer for it, less innovative, less knowledgeable, less appreciative and less resilient.

The context of valuing diversity

In the 1980's and 1990's, the focus on diversity was concerned mainly with cultural differences, inequality, race and colour. While they remain an important aspect of the subject, there is today a growing recognition that in the complex world in which we live, concerns about diversity go well beyond issues of race and colour. In particular, today's workplace engenders diversity in its many forms and all these impact upon personal and organisational effectiveness. Because we dress alike and are subject to similar codes of professional conduct and so forth, we seem to be superficially alike and there is therefore no cause for concern. Yet, underlying this calm surface behaviour, there are differences in thinking, preferences, attitudes, approaches, personal philosophies and values. The continued suppression and denial of these is fertile ground for lack of trust, quiet resentment, poor communication, unstable teamwork

and mediocre performance. Often, when we become aware of this situation, we seldom attribute lack of valuing diversity as possibly one of the key causal factors. Suppression and denial either persist or we tolerate intermittent bursts of interpersonal or group conflict. It drains the energy, commitment and creativity of everyone in the workplace. Negative working relationships do not bring out the best in people. Knowledge workers, and that includes occupational therapists, thrive through mutual caring, professional acknowledgement, creative challenge and productive engagement.

In racially oriented societies such as South Africa, diversity tends to be seen primarily as a matter of cultural differences and inequality. Despite being understandable, it

is not always the case. The notion of diversity relates to significant differences in the totality of human experience, including personal and group make-up.

Within an organisation, diversity encompasses every individual difference that affects a task or relationship.

It has an impact on the products and services rendered by the people as well as on personal, interpersonal and organisational activities.

Consider the following questions when thinking about diversity in your workplace: What is the diversity climate in your organisation? Do you stop and think of its impact? Is it positive or negative? Is it empowering or stifling human talent?

Diversity is a narrative about nature. Nature is amazing for its endless variety. The creative energy of life and living arises from the depths of this timeless diversity. Each occupational therapist and each of their clients are part of the diverse scenario that must be valued. A narrow focus on diversity is worth avoiding. It increases tensions between people because it tends to present differences as opposites that amount to 'either or' choices. Such choices are often forced, and also false.

Over and above these issues, on African soil, valuing diversity is about public morality and human decency. It is about an interpretation of Ubuntu that says: "you are different because I am also different. Let us accept one another as we are and work together for the greater good of human kind."

Does valuing diversity really matter?

The short and simple answer is yes, but we first have to overcome challenges. The first one is the challenge of the self. First, at a personal level, we need to be aware of our own individual difference and learn to value it. Each person's uniqueness is their own way of being in the world - their individual identity. As the profound wisdom of the East teaches - being comes before doing. Each one has to come to terms in a positive way with who they are. It is getting to grips with one's fundamental nature as a spiritual being because the qualities of valuing, appreciating, empowering, caring, resilience,

"We make a living from what we get.
We make a life from what we give."

.... Winston Churchill



love and many more are spiritual in nature. They are not finite and they cannot be exhausted. They are not material and cannot be developed or diminished in a mechanistic way. They are our own way of being in the world. To each is given in different measure and there lies the roots of diversity among us. These spiritual gifts provide us with the capacity to take action. Therefore, we are, before we do. Being comes before action. Valuing diversity on a sustainable basis takes this understanding into account and builds on it.

The second challenge comes with our group identities. It is a set of identity issues that arise from socialisation processes. We may be engineers, chartered accountants, managers, blacks, whites, educated, uneducated, rich, or poor and so on. Attached to each of these categories are distinctive paradigms or philosophies of life that are in some way unique to the group. They reflect a discrete value system that is often distinct and self-perpetuating. Its logic of existence is self-defined, self-conscious and self-preserving. There lies the root of another struggle over deciding which differences are legitimate and which are not. These conflicts are complex in their depth and endless in their duration. They often go underground so that on the surface, things remain superficially calm and group members can retreat to their comfort zones and carry on their business as usual.

The third level of struggle around issues of diversity is organisational. Power is the complicating factor here, more so than on the other two levels. Organisational design, still largely drawn from the model of the ancient Roman army and the church in medieval times, arranges relationships in a purposeful yet concentrated, tight and hierarchical manner in which some people have power or status over others. To date, I know of no real groundbreaking designs that deviate from this model.

Since human systems tend to give rise to complexity, power relations become the complicating variable. Power is dynamic and its levers of control are not always obvious within a given organisational setting. But these levers are also challengeable. People differ in their inclination and ability to navigate power relations in organisations. This is yet another source of diversity. Power is often negatively perceived and this perception may be unjustified. Power is in the mind of the user. It may be used constructively and with a sense of accountability to achieve ends that benefit many others, not just the one who wields the power. Alternatively, it may be used in corrupt and damaging ways. If unchecked, the organisation, its people and those they serve may be the losers.

Such is the power of unbridled and unaccountable diversity. Power diversifies. Power differentiates. The question is whether it does so with integrity. Integrity is a non-negotiable quality of outstanding leadership. Good leaders translate power into a positive influence in order to deal with differences in the organisation in a productive and equitable manner. Using power constructively is a difficult challenge because leadership issues that matter and that have real potential to make a difference generally have no obvious solutions.

Yes, valuing diversity does matter in our lives and in the organisations in which we work. The challenge is: how do we value diversity and under what circumstances?

Diversity and purposeful integration

In my view, the mindset of knowledge workers is more like that of cats and less like that of sheep. Given a healthy working environment, they think and act independently. They appreciate being given space to do so. After all, this freedom leads to full professional expression and fulfilment. The problem is that it may not always happen in a way that values the diversity that exists in the workplace.

Valuing diversity is important to teamwork, and knowledge workers need to be sensitive to it and be sure to leverage the diversity of their teams. It is about synergy. Synergy, in my view, is about recognising people's different but complementary strengths and harnessing them in ways that promote common purpose and lead to concrete achievements. In a synergistic situation, one does

not seek to eliminate different individual strengths but to harmonise them by giving each one space for practical expression, while orienting them together towards common purpose and clear goals. Synergy is more than just additional group strength. It has a multiplier effect. It is not like five plus five but more like five times five. It transforms combined human efforts into something greater than their sum total.

Synergy requires mental habits that do not come easily to professionals and other knowledge workers, especially in competitive work environments or ones in which protecting one's turf or working in silos are entrenched. Synergy requires knowing one's own strengths together with the willingness to recognise and embrace the talents of others. It is the basic formula for generating creative energy and the drive to perform. Empathy, mutual appreciation, collaboration and teamwork are critical competencies that reflect the presence of synergy. Within organisations, potential synergy is widespread. However, the inclination to tap into its vitality is not. It may be due to a number of factors such as lack of awareness of the need for synergy, poor strategic orientation, performance management systems that hinder collaboration across departments or institutions, negative political under-currents in the organisation, and so on. Working with synergy is an acquired habit. It arises from recognising and respecting the abilities of others, matching them to your own while seeking to work innovatively with them. It takes a developed emotional intelligence to look for synergy and capitalise on it.

Conclusion

As professionals, we work to change things for the better in our fields of endeavour. However, we live and work in a complex world. Any inability on our part to recognise and value the diversity that surrounds us is to compromise our collective purpose and weaken our individual efforts. Valuing diversity will not force itself upon us, but our results will show whether we honour it or not.

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