

**DANCING WITH RESISTANCE:  
LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN FOSTERING A CULTURE OF  
INCLUSION**

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*An e-mail message using a racial epithet to refer to another employee is exchanged by co-workers. The e-mail is brought to the attention of the HR director, who follows up with a preliminary investigation. The person who sent the e-mail defends himself by saying that he had no idea that the depiction he used carried any racial overtones; he was merely describing the characteristics of the individual. HR informs the leader, who has been explicitly and particularly committed to increasing diversity and fostering inclusion in the organization. As word leaks out, co-workers line up on both sides of the issue – each creating their own version of what happened.*

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter is written in full collaboration. Authorship is listed in reverse alphabetical order.

This incident could have happened in any contemporary organization. One person sends another a comment, a note, or an e-mail, intending to discharge some annoyance or frustration. Each of the people involved—whether directly or peripherally—formulates a narrative to make sense of the incident. For some the incident appears to be simply an interpersonal issue. Others see it as a misunderstanding produced by patterns of behavior rooted in historical relationships among different identity groups, groups to which we have different connections such that some are “my group” and others are “your group” or “their group.” In short, everyone has a story not only about what happened and what it means, but also stories about their own and others’ stories (Wasserman, 2005a).

The conflicting narratives that live in organizations in the conversations that people have in the hallways, in the bathrooms, and in “personal” e-mail messages often echo unresolved tension that undermines official commitment to diversity and inclusion by the organization and its leaders. Just the mere mention of diversity in organizations these days can easily evoke a sigh, accompanied by statements from dominant groups such as: “Haven’t we done enough!” “This is not my problem!” or “What do they expect from us?” These comments all can be interpreted by leaders as expressing a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and exhaustion, and create a response that appears to surrender responsibility and accountability. At the same time we might hear comments from members of typically marginalized groups such as, “Here we go again. Am I going to be

expected to bare my soul and expose my vulnerabilities so others can learn from them? I am tired of doing all the work!" How can leaders address behavior and attitudes that, intentionally or not, challenge the commitment to foster an organizational culture that actively values diversity? More importantly, what part do leaders play in creating a meta-narrative—an overarching story—in which all the members of the organization can play an active and meaningful role?

As scholar-practitioners who have spent most of the past 20 years focusing on fostering diversity within organizations, we have partnered and consulted with leaders at all levels in public and private organizations about how best to design and implement strategies that maximize the benefits of diversity and foster cultures of inclusion. For us, a culture of inclusion recognizes, respects, values, and utilizes the talents and contributions of all the organization's people—current and potential—across multiple lines of difference (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002a; Mor-Barak, 2005). In organizations with cultures of inclusion, people of all social identity groups have the opportunity to be present, to have their voices heard and appreciated, and to engage in core activities on behalf of the collective. Holvino, Ferdman, and Merrill-Sands (2004) described it this way:

Inclusion in multicultural organizations means that there is equality, justice, and full participation at both the group and individual levels, so that members of different groups not only have equal access to opportunities, decision making, and positions

of power, but they are actively sought out *because* of and with their differences. In a multicultural, inclusive organization, differences of all types become integrated into the fabric of the business, such that they become a necessary part of doing its everyday work (p. 248, italics in the original).

We have seen both progress and resistance to diversity and inclusion efforts. Based on our experience, we suggest that failed change efforts are less about resistance itself and more about the *story that is told* about it in the inner dialogue of the organization, together with what leaders and members of organizations do with that story.

This chapter explores how leaders can engage resistance in support of their activities to champion diversity and inclusion in their organization. Just as fostering diversity starts at the top, so too does engaging resistance. Resistance can take many forms. The success or failure of any change initiative is determined by what leaders do with resistance (Maurer, 1996; 2002). When resistance is ignored or addressed ineffectively, it becomes a negative force that can threaten change. When leaders expect, acknowledge and embrace resistance, it becomes a powerful instrument for change.

In this chapter, we invite leaders to “dance with resistance,” and make it work for them by transforming the energy of the challenges they encounter into sources of creative opportunities. The image of *dancing with* highlights the

dynamic aspects of engaging productively with resistance in the context of a relationship within which skills matter and in which practice improves performance. Essentially, effective leaders must listen to the story behind resistance and engage with it rather than argue about it. As in dancing, where partnering in relationship with the music makes for a better performance, leading resistance requires staying connected even when one's toes have been stepped on. In dancing, as in inclusive leadership, the joint performance is more important than either partner's individual needs or movements. Although leaders hold the responsibility to define the music to which the organization is dancing, as well as most often to suggest a particular choreography, the execution of the dance itself involves a performance that requires the whole system. Moreover, the art of coordinating in the process of dancing results in the creating of something new that would not have been possible from either dance partner alone.

We begin by framing leader's role in designing and shaping the organizational system and in giving voice to a unified meta-narrative that supports the vision of an inclusive culture. We frame resistance as an expression of the complexities and challenges of diversity and inclusion efforts, rather than as a force to be silenced. Resistance, as such, is framed as an important force to be mined for lessons to be learned. Building on this, we discuss examples of how leaders can model ways to support diversity and inclusion throughout the organization through the process of "dancing with resistance."

## **The Role of Leaders**

The key role of leaders is to shape the system, to articulate a compelling vision that mobilizes groups and individuals, and to create the conditions that make that vision a reality (Oshry, 1995; see also Williams, 2005). Leaders are also responsible for holding and communicating the multiple complexities and challenges of diversity and inclusion in ways that are simple and accessible. As the framers and shapers of organizations, leaders need both to articulate and to represent a new meta-narrative<sup>2</sup>, one that conveys a process and structure for engagement. Leaders are responsible to model this form of engagement.

### ***What is Leadership?***

We view leadership as an activity that is influenced by position, type of performance and role in the system. This view contrasts with the view of leadership as a set of personality characteristics. Thus, anyone in an organization may show leadership at various times, regardless of formal position. The same person who displays leadership at one time may not at other times.

Traditional images of leaders in charge, characteristic of the old command and control cultures, no longer apply unquestionably in today's complex environments. Contemporary organizations are characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and interdependence. Heifetz (1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002)

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<sup>2</sup> By *meta-narrative*, we mean an overarching story, or one that allows interpreting all the other stories within it. In the case of inclusion, the meta-narrative may include core values or other framing components that provide a framework not only for understanding what inclusion is and how it matters to the organization, but also for ways of *being* inclusive.

proposes a model of leadership that distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems call for appropriate expertise and procedures. Adaptive challenges involve situations in which there is no clear answer, and require experimentation, and improvisation. When it comes to issues of diversity and inclusion, adaptive situations and challenges greatly outnumber the technical ones making it essential that leaders be open to alternative approaches from diverse contributors.

Adaptive challenges call for leaders of teams and organizations to create the conditions to mobilize groups and individuals, provide direction, protection, and orientation, manage conflict, and shape norms (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Considering these functions in relationship to leading a diverse workplace and fostering an inclusive culture illuminates differences between technical problems and adaptive challenges. For example, leaders who provide *direction* for adaptive work on inclusion might emphasize long-term strategic objectives such as ensuring an adequate future labor pool over tactical approaches that respond with a short-term view. Adaptive approaches focus on environmental responsiveness as a key rationale for increasing diversity and inclusion, with competitive advantage as a core component.

With regards to *managing conflict*, technical problems require leaders to find ways to defuse situations and restore calm, perhaps keeping antagonists apart or otherwise emphasizing more expedient communication. Leaders engaged with

adaptive challenges, in contrast, reframe conflict as an advantage, as something that expands and deepens how the organization makes sense of issues. Thus a key leadership competency is skillfully engaging conflict throughout the organization.

In many organizations, leaders are quoted in publications or shown in videos, talking about appropriate behavior with regards to diversity. In adaptive situations, leaders must go beyond these behaviors on a regular basis to review, challenge and revise norms to address and alleviate unintended consequences. One example of this would be moving beyond rewarding individual performance to also reward people for working collaboratively as they participate in teams. Because resistance to diversity often takes the form of challenging changes in norms, leaders must help associates understand that modifying norms is not about lowering standards but about expanding the range of options for being successful.

Other examples show up in traditionally male occupations such as law enforcement and firefighting. As women have moved into non-traditional jobs, such as police work, some have objected by voicing the concern that women cannot handle the same physical demands as men. Others recognize the unique relational and communication skills women bring that often enable them to deal with challenging situations in different ways than men. A story in this regard was told in an educational session about how a SWAT team was preparing to go into a very explosive domestic situation in which they had to gain access to an



apartment where hostages were being held. The female officer kept attempting to get the attention of the male officers as they were preparing to break the door down with force. When they finally listened to her, she informed them that she had obtained the key to the door from the apartment manager while they were preparing to force entry. There are many examples of women officers being particularly skilled at de-escalating violent domestic situations by talking with people rather than resorting to the use of deadly force. Similarly, fire departments that aimed to increase their representation of women heard complaints that women would not be able to perform well because they could not lift the same amount of weight as the men. Yet they found that women offered alternative strategies that did not require heavy lifting, saving both the men and women unnecessary injuries.

Building a culture of inclusion involves a new set of leadership qualities and skills including flexibility, fluidity, self-awareness and mindfulness, courage and the capacity to be vulnerable in a powerful way. Table 1 focuses on this distinction between leadership qualities that were once seen as critical and relational qualities that emphasize coordinating with others in service of what needs to be accomplished.

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While some view a diversity initiative as a training intervention to foster awareness among individuals, sustained change requires structural transformation

that shifts the very nature of how people engage with one another. Zane (2002) makes this point in discussing the role of leadership in a major culture change process in a financial institution:

Having heard what people ... said, he announced ... that the scope of the “managing diversity” initiative was about to be altered.... [T]he unit of change had ... moved from individual change, thoroughly altering group and intergroup relations, to creating an organization that was able to foster the development of all individuals, regardless of rank and department. In addition, he stated that the dimensions of differences to be addressed were no longer limited to race and gender but included sexual orientation, age, and any other demographic characteristic that led to marginalization.... Moreover, he wedded the diversity initiative to the need for structural change and laid out how he expected managers to use their authority. Rather than carrying out the more traditional bureaucratic functions, such as providing oversight and correction or strict gate-keeping around the information flow, managers were to become teachers, coaches, and communicators. The task of senior managers was to help people at all levels to become better problem solvers and risk takers. (p. 348)

Leading a diverse workplace in a way that fosters inclusion requires adaptive and innovative responses at various levels, including individual, group, intergroup,

and systemic or organizational. It also requires dealing with particular complexities and challenges, discussed in the following sections.

### ***Complexities of Diversity and Creating Inclusive Cultures***

Creating and maintaining an inclusive culture is a complex, and ongoing process that requires continuous self-examination and thoughtful reflection by leaders and all members of the organization. Among the many complexities of diversity, we specifically explore the dynamics of social identities, within and across group differences, the contemporary manifestations of prejudice and discrimination, the social and legal environment, and the ongoing process of learning to relate with another who is different. After we outline the complexities of diversity and creating inclusive cultures, we then discuss what it means to be an inclusive leader.

***Social identities as dynamic and multifaceted.*** The dynamics of social identity and the way groups identify themselves are multifaceted and are continuously changing. What was true about a group twenty years ago, and what it means to hold a particular identity may no longer be true. For example, the labels “African American,” “Latino,” “Woman,” “White,” “Lesbian” have all changed over time, both for individuals and for groups (Ferdman, 1992; 1995). There are no blanket rules for inclusion that apply to everyone at every time in every circumstance (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002a).

The very process of building inclusion can lead to changes in the way groups behave and see themselves. This can be difficult for members of dominant groups, who must come to terms with a social identity associated with historical oppression and/or power, regardless of whether the individual experiences that association personally. For example, most heterosexuals are not conscious about how they contribute to maintaining a social system that is hostile to and sometimes even dangerous for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Yet, fostering inclusion across multiple sexual orientations may require heterosexual members to become more conscious of previously unexplored dynamics ranging from sharing family pictures or talking about personal events, to being able to share health benefits and privileged legal status as partners. While inequities might be perceived as more historic than present for some, part of the leadership challenge is to determine when and how to address current realities and counter challenges, particularly those faced by marginalized groups.

***Social identities: Between-group and within-group issues.*** A second form of complexity has to do with the fact that there are both between-group and within-group differences (see Ferdman, 1992; 1995). As the issue of difference overall becomes more explicitly addressed in organizations, resistance arises because some individuals do not see themselves as the same as other members of their associated social identity groups. For example, the label African American may be applied to many people who were formerly referred to as Black. However,

within this group there is great diversity, including Caribbean-Americans, African immigrants, and second-generation Africans who consider themselves very different from African Americans who have lived on the mainland of the United States for multiple generations. Latinos are often from a range of countries, cultures, and socioeconomic classes, and have a great deal of within-group diversity (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). Some gay and lesbian employees may be particularly concerned with domestic partner benefits, others are concerned that those who proselytize in the lunchroom may be homophobic, and yet others fear being “outed.”

Between-group issues hold their own complexities. In one organization, African Americans and Latinos compete to be the largest minority, while Asians are often considered the “good” minority. These complexities vary by organization, industry and geographic location as well as other demographics.

***The nature of contemporary prejudice and discrimination.*** A third layer of the complexity is the often subtle and covert nature of contemporary prejudice and discrimination (see, e.g., Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Overt racist acts, for example may be less common now than in the past. Yet inclusion requires proactive behavior and processes to subvert less overt behaviors that are not easily marked, especially in the context of contemporary human resource practices and rules. The legal system, especially in the United States, has been more likely to emphasize blatant, overt acts of

discrimination, and is less willing to sanction more subtle behaviors. Traditional “ways of doing business” are often associated with such subtleties. For example, masculine notions and approaches typically “baked” into our workplaces can be oppressive for women (see, e.g., Maier, 1999). Similarly, the expectation to engage in proactive self-promotion can be challenging for people from collectivist cultures such as Latinos and Asians for whom humility is highly valued.

People can be very open to diversity in terms of numbers, and yet extremely resistant to changing how they work. One of the challenges posed by covert prejudice and discrimination is that they seem to characterize only “bad” people engaging in individual acts. By focusing primarily on overt and blatantly hostile acts of discrimination, the systemic practices, and norms of behaviors that support an oppressive workplace go unchecked.

***Social and legal views.*** The fourth level of complexity is the social and legal views about the degree to which it is appropriate to explicitly consider and address particular social identities at work. For example, is it legitimate, to create support networks based on sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and/or gender, or are such groupings seen as “special” interests that unfairly and illegitimately divide the organization? What if a group that wants to self-associate is composed of evangelical Christians? Or environmentalists, in the context of an oil-drilling business? People are often confused about when it is appropriate to mark one’s own identities or those of others. The challenge for leaders and non-dominant

group members is to articulate the value these groups provide to their members relative to the value they bring to the organization as a whole. For example, when Latinos have an opportunity to meet together and strengthen their collective voice, they can better support the organization's efforts to recruit and retain Latino leaders and employees. Moreover, as diversity and inclusion initiatives succeed, and as society changes, identities that were previously hidden and/or not discussed become more salient; for example., many corporations are now dealing with their approach to transgendered employees, a topic that just a few years ago was not on the radar screen of managers.

***From achieving cultural competence to developing relational eloquence.***

Much of the current literature talks about achieving cultural competence (e.g., Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004). Cultural competence is focused on the skill-building of the person. In contrast, relational eloquence (Wasserman, 2005b) is a competence of continuously attending to how one is making sense or coordinating meaning with another or others *in the relationship*. Creating shared meaning with another who is different from you in significant ways calls on the capacity to stay engaged at a meta-level to the multiple ways in which people interpret a situation or a relationship.

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce, 2004), is both a practical theory based on a social constructionist approach to communication and a set of practical tools that help explore and unpack how people in relationships

coordinate meaning. The theory is based on the belief that meaning is continuously being construed in the back-and-forth processes in conversations, in our social encounters, and in other kinds of communication events. Rather than communication being the transmission of meaning, communicating is doing something: *making* meaning. The key concepts of CMM are coordination, coherency, and mystery. The concept of coordinating refers to how we are creating meaning continuously in how we respond to and elicit responses. Coordination may be smooth or dissonant, intentional or unintentional. Coherence and mystery address what we do to manage meaning. We create coherence when we coordinate our narratives.

Among the tools within CMM there are four particular models that help reflective people amplify different aspects of our encounters. One, the Serpentine model, addresses the boundaries one uses to define the past and future surrounding the episode, be it a few months, a few years, or a hundred years. A second model is referred to as the Daisy model, with the petals of the daisy representing the particular voices or influences one uses to interpret or make sense of the episode. We each choose, with more or less self-awareness, what frames of reference we foreground. Another model guides us to explore how meaning is made in the way we tell the story, including the parts of the story that may be untold, unknown, unheard, or even not allowed or available. The fourth model amplifies the level of context we use to make sense of the situation. Often, in



conversations or episodes regarding diversity, people do not understand each other due to one interpreting the situation at different levels of context than the other. One might interpret the situation making the self or the individual central, another may be making the group or cultural identity central, and yet another may be understanding it as a history story. One may be punctuating the episode in the present moment while the other's interpretation accounts for historical patterns that are repeating themselves in the present moment.

Our narratives are woven from stories we inherit and create from our experiences. Our stories about ourselves and others are always incomplete and biased, limited by our own perspectives, histories, and purposes. Stories that differ from our own are full of rich possibilities of expanding how we make meaning. Relational eloquence is created when we stay engaged and explore what might seem to be confusing or uncomfortable episodes and create a more expansive and inclusive narrative that holds different versions side-by-side (Wasserman, 2005b).

### ***Challenges of Inclusive Leadership***

These complexities of diversity at work lead to particularly intricate challenges for inclusive leadership. Often diversity is framed as a dilemma to be managed. We frame the overarching challenge to be seeing the opportunity that manifests as resistance and to dance with it in a way that creates a pathway for inclusion. To do so, leaders must demonstrate a certain level of comfort with the

discomfort of ambiguity and uncertainty and foster curiosity toward engaging in new conversations. This involves explicitly redefining the boundaries and rules for acceptable behaviors, thus creating the conditions to explore differences. On that basis, leaders can then begin to model an understanding of and relative comfort with diversity while being authentic as they use their personal experiences strategically. We expand on each of these in the following paragraphs.

***Explicitly redefining the boundaries and rules for acceptable behaviors.***

To function properly, any organization must be explicit about rules and boundaries. Enhancing inclusion means continuously questioning and adapting those boundaries so they apply and have meaning for everyone (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002b). One source of resistance may have to do with the confusion or disorientation some experience as leaders deal with setting boundaries. Rules, behaviors, and norms are no longer clear and predictable. Behaviors and approaches that were once acceptable are no longer permitted. Finding the appropriate means of doing this requires flexibility, courage, and even vulnerability. Leaders must take these opportunities to expand the conversation and be more explicit about the rationale for certain decisions. In so doing, they can expand the boundaries of what is discussable in a way that facilitates more open conversations and interactions. The form of the conversation itself can

support redefining boundaries from fixed and immutable to being constituted in an ongoing process conducted in relationship to core values and principles.

***Creating the conditions for conversations to explore differences.***

Inclusive leaders should encourage and facilitate opportunities for dialogue in their organization, particularly across multiple lines of difference. Yet, oftentimes, leadership depends on directing groups and teams to make decisions and move forward. In the context of diversity, when leaders emphasize one side at the expense of the other, resistance feelings and behavior may follow. Dealing with diversity and creating inclusion requires holding a fine balance of process and task. This calls for skilled leaders to inspire groups and individuals to be appropriately self-reflective while getting the work done. Leaders also need to make a distinction between when they are inviting dialogue and when they are not.

***Modeling an understanding of and relative comfort with diversity.***

Inclusive leaders must model a willingness to explore and engage differences and to learn to work more effectively across those differences. This necessitates a focus on their own development, particularly with regard to intergroup attitudes and behavior, together with a willingness to engage in continuous learning about differences. Related to this, inclusive leaders need to demonstrate qualities that are often not associated with traditional notions of leadership, including flexibility, courage, and vulnerability. The challenge is how to convey these

characteristics in ways that will support the diversity initiative and at the same time create a leadership presence. Doing so may require leaders to pursue learning experiences outside the organization to afford them the balance of having a place where they can be vulnerable as they learn, develop, and grow on the one hand and to demonstrate leadership within the organization on the other hand. Ultimately, the ability to model inclusion is enhanced by the capacity to be vulnerable,

*Being authentic and using personal experiences strategically.* Any leader is a member of multiple groups. These common bonds create an affinity with members of the organization who share that group identity. Being explicit about membership in a particular group can facilitate connection for some, while distancing others. The challenge for a leader is to be fully himself or herself in a way that fosters the ability of everyone in the group and organization also to be fully themselves (see, e.g., Berg, 2002).

### **Understanding and Reinterpreting Resistance:**

#### **Narratives and Meta-Narratives of Diversity**

Most dictionaries define resistance as a force that prevents or interferes with an opposing force. Viewed in this way, resistance is often framed as something to combat or conquer. We offer an alternative way of viewing resistance. By framing it as an expression, as something to be engaged with, and

as a form of data to be understood, resistance can provide important information for fostering shared meaning.

Maurer (1996) defines resistance as “a force that slows or stops movement” (p. 23). Despite the reference to slowing or stopping, Maurer does not regard resistance as a negative force; rather, he argues that it is a natural and often helpful component of any change process. Because people and organizations strive for stability and seek to avoid possible harm, any focus on change is likely to be accompanied by resistance.

We suggest that resistance communicates a message of complaint that in turn can yield an invitation to responsibility. For example, a leader might respond to the complaint, “we can’t have fun anymore – we are walking on eggshells not to offend anyone” with an invitation to learn how we can have fun while being respectful. The resistance leverages turns in the conversation that could not have been possible without the initiating complaint. The rhythm of the complaint and the response creates what we call the *dance of resistance*.

The key to effective change leadership involves understanding this process and learning how to capitalize on it, first by recognizing resistance, and second by working with it appropriately. Indeed, it is more often the reaction to resistance rather than the presence of resistance that is problematic, resulting in failed change efforts. As we discuss in this chapter and as is illustrated in many of the other chapters in this book, this can apply to diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Like dancing, working with resistance requires gracefully and skillfully acknowledging, engaging, and moving with the forces and energy of a range of experiences and competencies, differentiated roles, and coordinated actions.

### ***Types and Degrees of Resistance***

The first task of leadership with regard to resistance is to recognize it and understand how it shows up. Maurer (1996) describes resistance as varying in intensity, and identifies three levels of resistance that are often misunderstood. Different types of resistance call for different responses, or coordinated action. In the midst of confusion, leaders might inadvertently pursue inappropriate or inadequate solutions despite their best intentions.

Level 1 resistance is the least intense, and is usually based on the change or idea itself. Maurer (1998) refers to this as “Information.” It may derive, for example, from lack of information or exposure to the change, misunderstanding of the change, or disagreement with what is proposed. Level 2 resistance, at a mid-level of intensity, involves deeper and often unspoken issues, and is based on emotional and physiological responses to the change. Issues involved here can include fear of being abandoned or isolated, or of losing power, status, or respect; mistrust; fatigue with change generally; and organizational cultures that are bureaucratic or misaligned. According to Maurer, most resistance to organizational change is of this type and intensity. Finally, the most intense resistance, Level 3, involves deep-rooted issues that go beyond the particular

change at hand. These can be connected to individual or personal issues as well as intergroup differences and animosities. Also, a historical pattern of Level 2 issues can also intensify into loss of hope or total lack of confidence and manifest as Level 3 intensity of resistance. In this type of resistance, simply the source of the change may be the reason people are against it, because they view that source as an enemy. In a recent interview (Chesapeake Bay Organization Development Network, 2005), Maurer summarized the concept in this way:

I believe there are three levels of resistance. Simply put: I don't get it. I don't like it. I don't like you. Any of those can kill a change. I use these levels as lenses to look at what's going on. What are the Level 1 information issues that are either helping or hindering work? What are the Level 2 emotional issues – like fear? To what degree do people have trust and confidence in those leading the change (Level 3)? So you see, each level can either work for you as support or against you as resistance. I like to think of each level as a sliding scale. (p.4)

In attempting to create more inclusive organizations, many leaders mistakenly assume that providing additional information can solve any resistance they encounter. This assumption often results in increasing the resistance as individuals continue to struggle with Level 2 and Level 3 issues, which are particularly likely in diversity initiatives. These more complex forms of resistance

are related to deeper emotional reactions such as fear of feeling incompetent or fear of loss of power or control. Simply providing more information will not eliminate these deeply rooted fears. Maurer describes Level 3 resistance as the most difficult to address because it is deeply entrenched and is related to cultural, religious or racial differences. These often come from long histories of mistrust between groups or significant clashes over values. Obviously more sophisticated and long-term strategies are called for to begin to address the more complex levels of resistance often connected to diversity and inclusion. In other words, Level 1 tactics rarely have any impact on Level 2 and 3 challenges.

In this regard, Friedman and Davidson (2001) describe the dynamics of what they call *second-order diversity conflict* and contrast with *first-order diversity conflict*. First-order diversity conflict is the conflict that arises based on different identities, such as intergroup discrimination. In contrast, second-order diversity conflict is the friction that arises as people react differently to the various approaches taken to address the first-order conflicts (e.g., to reduce discrimination). These authors point out that it is this latter type of conflict that tends to be relatively more hidden and more difficult to address. Moreover, how this second-order conflict is handled will affect the possibility of addressing the first-order conflicts effectively.

These different kinds of reactions are typically a manifestation of a breakdown in the coordination of meaning, be it the context one is privileging, the



way one is defining the past, present and desired future of the episode or perhaps the form and content of the storytelling. Resistance can also be viewed as an enactment of storytelling in the form of complaints. Although some of the narrative is related to long histories of mistrust between groups or significant clashes over values, an important part of the narrative is also related to a desire, fear, or a need for self or team preservation.

Kegan and Lahey (2000) posit that there is much to be learned from complaints when they are understood as related to values and deeply held commitments. For example, the complaint quoted earlier, “What more do they expect?” might be an expression of a more deeply held commitment of “doing it right” and “being seen as a champion of social justice.” Like Maurer, Kegan and Lahey warn that the failure to engage and more deeply understand these complaints is the greatest barrier to dialogue and problem solving. Leaders need to listen to the stories being told beyond surface complaints and to address the deeper, underlying issues facing their organizations. Although it may seem easier in the short term to ignore or minimize resistance to their change efforts, in the long run the costs of avoidance far outweigh the benefits.

Leaders who are able to understand and then mine the resistance they encounter are in a better position to develop strategies that truly address the needs and hopes of their employees. Organizations continue to cycle back over and over the same issues without addressing or resolving them because the root causes are

missed in the analysis. Superficial framing of resistance often leads to superficial strategizing. Noticing resistance creates an opening for the surfacing of more and better options. One way of noticing modes of resistance is to listen to the metaphors being lived in the stories and narratives of diversity.

### ***The Meta-Narrative Regarding Resistance and Diversity***

The concept of *meta-narrative* draws on Arnett's idea of a "humble narrative," which "does not dictate the way to approach a situation, but offers a background set of assumptions agreed upon by enough people to permit it to influence everyday perception and actions" (Arnett & Arneson, 1999, p. 52). It is in the background because it guides the way people communicate rather than constituting the substance of the communication.

Arnett and Arneson (1999) observe that in today's culture, we lack agreement in fundamental areas of values, actions, and behaviors. In the absence of agreement, we make noises of cynicism. Our cynicism is almost like background noise in that we are so used to it we no longer register the sounds. We hear this form of cynicism in many of our clients. A person who feels subject to discrimination or exclusion may exhibit a performance that seems careless and insolent and express deep cynicism about whether change is possible. Yet when invited to be engaged in a way that taps into a source of meaningful contribution to him and to the organization, his performance is brighter and more energized.

This demonstrates the importance of people having a story into which they can write themselves.

All too often in organizations, we perpetuate cultures in which people seem like the walking dead. They operate as if on automatic, no longer able to recognize the important, the vital, and in some cases the sacred. They have lost their connection to being alive—at least for the eight hours during which they operate within the organization's walls. The call for a new meta-narrative is a call to breathe life into this resistance. By working to understand the lack of connection and working to engage with those suffering from this passivity, leaders may be able to find ways to energize diversity and inclusion initiatives, even when, paradoxically, these members of the organization initially express skepticism or even opposition to aspects of the initiative. The key is including, to the extent possible, all members of the organization in the process, and finding meta-narratives for engagement that speak to the various constituencies without undermining the effort to build a culture of inclusion (Wasserman, 2005b). Indeed, the only way to do the latter is to maintain ongoing dialogue, even in the face of opposition (Ferdman and Davidson, 2002a, 2002b).

Arnett and Anderson (1999) make a distinction between two modes of engagement, *intimacy* and *civility*, and their implications for making meaningful change in the engagement of diversity. They suggest that intimacy—in an age of diversity, change, and difference—keeps the structure of the conversation at the

interpersonal, and so makes the issues into personal ones. Civility, they assert, calls for the construction of something that does not yet exist, “an agreed-upon communicative convention about respect for the other and our relational responsibility in an interpersonal relationship” (p. 284). Often, in their search for connection and meaning, people seek something *from* others. The frame of civility suggests that we are better served seeking what we can *make* together. We join each other in the third person narrative to make sense of our shared experiences.

In the next section, we give examples of typical narratives and discourses of diversity and how these can be listened to in a new way so as to better hear the commitments and possibilities that live in these stories. More specifically, we show how these stories that are often heard as complaints or manifestations of resistance can be mined for opportunities to see the same situation through different lenses.

### ***The Narratives/Discourses of Diversity***

There are many narratives of diversity, each offering a window into the world of competing commitments. We have chosen a few of these to demonstrate how expressions that are often easily interpreted as resistance can instead provide opportunities for jointly creating new, deeper shared meaning that can better lead to shared commitments. These narratives, expressed as complaints, may sound like the following:

- 1) *It did not happen on my watch.* For some, diversity is seen as an individual and strictly behavioral issue. From this perspective, we often hear statements such as: “Why should I be involved if I personally do not discriminate? I do the right thing!” This complaint can be in reference to the present—for example, the specific team or organization—as well as to the historical framing of discrimination and oppression. This complaint highlights the individual, placing patterns of discrimination and systemic issues in the background.
- 2) *Why can't we just move on?* This voice feels impatience with people who are still telling the story of how historic patterns of discrimination still resonate in the current environment and the current discourse. The tension in this conversation is between those who want to tell their story, be heard and understood and those who want to move on. Paradoxically, the more one side stays with their complaint, the louder the voice of the other becomes (see Ferdman, 1997).
- 3) *We have to do what is best and most efficient for the business.* This complaint implies that it is easiest to work with those with whom we are most familiar and usually, most comfortable, to preserve the status quo. The idea of engaging with those with whom we are less familiar and therefore not as comfortable adds a level of complexity and incompetence that is perceived in some way to be bad for business. This complaint

suggests that we are compromising standards rather than enhancing the complement of capabilities and views by attending to diversity.

In each of these complaints, there is also embedded a competing commitment. As both Ferdman (1997) and Thomas and Ely (1996; Ely & Thomas, 2001) point out, there is value to be gained from considering the conceptual paradigm from which particular perspectives on or reactions to diversity emanate. Ferdman distinguishes, for example, between individualistic and group perspectives on fairness. In the first, any attention to group memberships in making decisions or allocating resources is viewed as patently unfair. In the latter perspective, *not* attending to group memberships can result in experiencing unfairness.

Thomas and Ely identify three paradigms from which individuals and organizations can approach diversity. From the perspective of the *discrimination-and-fairness paradigm*, the goal of a diversity initiative should be to reduce invidious distinctions based on group memberships. Thus, as in the individualistic perspective, those taking this view may see any attempt to mark group memberships as unfair or inappropriate. The *access-and-legitimacy paradigm* views differences as a resource to be exploited. From this perspective, the goal of diversity initiatives should be to make sure that people are able to enter and work in niches where their differences from others would be most useful to the organization. In this perspective, the problem may be viewed as insufficiently attending to other group memberships and intragroup differences. Finally, the

*learning-and-effectiveness paradigm* involves emphasizing the ways in which differences can contribute to mutual learning and growth, both for the members of the organization and the organization as a whole. When diversity initiatives stem from this view, yet members of the organization understand the goal of diversity from one of the other perspectives, the response may appear as resistance. We suggest that these responses are more informative when viewed as commitments to alternative perspectives or paradigms of diversity.

In the first narrative listed above, the commitment is best viewed as emanating from an individualistic perspective on fairness (Ferdman, 1997). The person expressing this complaint is also voicing a value in being someone who does not discriminate, and who is not responsible for the discrimination of others in the past or in the present. Resistance is an expression of commitment to being good, fair and just. Underlying this commitment might be a competing commitment to security and the status quo. Engaging with that resistance would involve recognizing the value of that perspective while expanding its boundaries, so that the group perspective is no longer seen as mutually exclusive with it. It might also focus on what those expressing the position hope to preserve, for themselves, their group memberships and the organization, that would, at the same time, support inclusion

The second narrative speaks from a desire to be future-focused and move on. One way of engaging this form of resistance would be to identify the different

ways various people frame or punctuate the relationships. Also helpful is making explicit the different ways in which people contextualize the present as discussed earlier, from an individual perspective versus a group or cultural lens. Just noting the difference often enables people to honor and include the others perspective.

The third voice is one that privileges the bottom line and business success. In this narrative, diversity is good as long as it enhances the bottom line. Support for initiatives that link people internally to externally targeted markets are in alignment with this perspective. Complaints in the form of resistance are likely to be voiced when such a connection is not readily apparent, as for example, when an African American man or a White woman is promoted or brought in from outside to lead the whole organization, even the divisions that are not explicitly marketing to people of color or White women. The competing commitment is to assuring that the person hired for a particular position is “competent.” Engaging the resistance would manifest in challenging the notion that diversity means compromising quality, and is in actuality a commitment to widening the breadth of contributions.

In each of these narratives, there is a complaint that supports a commitment. In some instances, the commitment is shared. What is needed is a meta-narrative that incorporates competing commitments (which might appear as resistance) so as to support a high performing and inclusive organization. Providing and communicating this meta-narrative is a key role of the leader.



### **Dancing with Resistance**

Like dancing Salsa, *relational eloquence* (Wasserman, 2005b), or leading in a way that invites and engages diversity, involves some basic moves. How one moves can show up in many ways in many different configurations. No two people will do it the same way. In this leadership performance, there are certain basics, yet beyond the basics, the dance will vary according to the particular relationship and the form the combined expression will take.

This is a new dance. We knew the old rules. With the new dance we might be awkward at first as we learn the new form of rhythm, the new back-and-forth. We might step on some toes while we are learning. We might have moments of caution. Yet the goal is to coordinate with new and different partners toward the expression of relational eloquence (Wasserman, 2005b). The better any one of us is, the better we are. Super good dancers can make anyone look good in step. This is what we mean by *relational responsibility*.

### ***Relational Responsibility***

Relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) shifts the focus from the self and the personal to the relationship and the relational. Thought, values, judgments, and conclusions do not originate from one's mind; rather they are construed by the "we." In relationship, our expression of self creates or limits or judges other people's assertions of identity; it makes space for or interrupts the

coordination of different perspectives, which Pearce (1989) calls cosmopolitan communication.

We arrive at a view of meaning as embedded within relational scenarios by focusing primarily on the means by which individuals' actions invite or suppress those of the others with whom they interact, and the way in which respondents' actions determine the implication of the initial action (Gergen, 1994). All that we take to be true of nature and of mind, of self and others, thus finds its origins within relationship (Gergen, 1994), or, in Martin Buber's (1947, 1959) terms, "In the beginning is the relation" (p.22). For Vygotsky (1978), the concept of the autonomous agent is a myth; each of us is constituted by the other, and we cannot deliberate or decide without implicating otherness. For others, such as Shotter (1994), Sampson (1993), and Hermans and Kempen (1993), the individual is dialogically constituted and inseparable from ongoing social process. What gets made or produced emerges from the space between, or the relationship. Thus, leaders who wish to dance with resistance must first understand the ways in which they are interconnected and moving together with those whom they are experiencing as resisting.

***Mindful Engagement: Generative Dialogue and Presence***

Scharmer's (2000) stage-based model of generative dialogue introduces a process model that charts the processes of discourse as groups move through four conversational fields (i.e., politeness, talking tough, reflective dialogue, and

generative dialogue). Through mindful engagement, we learn to *have* our thoughts rather than *be* our thoughts. Generative dialogue practice cultivates an intersubjective space in which awareness and mindfulness can increasingly permeate the conversation. With practice, this begins to create a holding space for conversation that can support a new form of engagement that, although challenging, diminishes risks of being overwhelming or threatening. What makes generative dialogue particularly effective as a developmental holding environment are the practices of suspension and presencing, as well as the capacity to simply *be* and co-construct meaning from the shared presence of the group.

### **Summary**

Resistance is an opportunity for leaders to mine as they champion initiatives that engage diversity and foster inclusion in their organization. It is a form of expression, a narrative that expresses concerns, fears, and confusion with regard to mystery and change. Leaders as the shapers of the organization culture need to be the voice of a unified meta-narrative that supports a vision of an inclusive culture that embraces the entire organization. The energy that lives in the stories of resistance, transformed into shared narratives, supports a culture of inclusion. Leaders who learn to “dance with resistance” model ways to support diversity and inclusion throughout the organization.

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Table 1

## Traditional versus Relational Leadership

<b>TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP</b>
Smooth things over	Set courageous expectations
Give marching orders	Set boundaries and frame the intention
Make decisions	Create a process for engagement and decision-making
Tell	Elicit and facilitate
Orient to outcomes	Orient to process
Focus on similarity and common ground	Value and pursue diversity