



Article 18: Playing with Diversity – Pain or Pleasure?

SO much research focusing on facts that demonstrate how sadly lacking in diversity are the power arenas in our corporations, governments and institutions. SO many demands and cries for others to take action to re-dress this. SO much being said about how vital it is we bring more diversity into these realms; accompanied by some evidence that suggests that more diversity means better results, better business, better performance, richer communities. And SO little enquiry about ‘how and why the pattern towards sameness perpetuates?’; nor about ‘how each of us is contributing to the drive towards sameness?’.

It is easy and commonplace for such exchanges to focus on the ‘out there’, third person domain – the abstract that has us diverting attention away from the first person and second person exchange: the singular ‘me’ and the singular ‘you’. The ‘me’ who, as an agent in the wider system has helped create and perpetuate a ‘sameness’ pattern playing out in the world I inhabit; the ‘you’ who, as an agent in the wider system has helped create and perpetuate a ‘sameness’ playing out in the world you inhabit. Until WE recognise our individual and collective part in co-creating the sameness pattern, it will be nigh on impossible to consciously shift the conditions to create a different pattern that truly welcomes and thrives on diversity.

In my last article I gave a definition of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS):

Complex adaptive systems: A collection of individual agents who have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways, and whose actions are interconnected such that they produce system-wide patterns, which in turn influence the behaviour of the agents

(Dr Glenda Eoyang, founder of Human Systems Dynamics Institute)

This definition sets a helpful context for understanding the dynamical¹ nature of what is at play amongst groups of people. From the footnote, we can see that of the 3 dimensions we can influence to shift a system towards a more or less ‘organised’ state, one of these relates to ‘difference’ – how much or how little difference that might exist between agents within a system which could be a community, an organisation, a Board, a political party etc. If there is little relevant difference between people (agents) then stasis and ‘group think’ will predominate. If we want more organised systems, these demand less difference within and between people; whilst creativity and transformative potential requires more difference and a less organised system.

THE POWER OF DIFFERENCE AND THE PULL OF SAMENESS

Difference creates a tension which helps us notice what is present – what we expect and don’t expect to see and experience. It is this difference that awakens us to the degree to which we are blind to what is present. It is difference that jolts us out of a safe, sleepy view of the world and alerts us to something we suddenly recognise we did or didn’t want. It is difference that quite literally creates the potential for creativity/ transformation, moving us away from what physicists call a state of entropy. Entropy – where sameness has become so dominant - signals ‘death’ of the system. This is one way of viewing what is happening throughout our traditional social and economic power-holding realms – where for decades or maybe even centuries, people have recruited and promoted in their own image, and in so doing have sown the seeds of ultimate decline and near-certain ‘death’.

DIVERSITY-AVOIDANCE

But if death is the corollary of similarity, why do we do seek similarity over difference? Perhaps it is because, in the short term, it appears to be more comfortable, easier, smoother? When we engage with those who are different to ourselves, we enter into a space that can be variously turbulent, shocking, even traumatic; or at best, exciting, creative, life-enhancing and life-sustaining. But to reach the positive outcomes we need to learn to bear and navigate the shocks, bumps and inevitable conflicts - and this means staying engaged and not opting out, running away, blaming or shaming those who show up differently to us. In essence we need to develop adaptive capacity: being sensitive enough to see what is present; responsive enough to take considered, purposeful action and robust enough to withstand personal and professional challenges. We need to be able to stand in the fire long enough for transformation to occur – wherever it occurs. Most of us run for the fire hoses and blankets to dampen the disturbance for fear it will run out of control and destroy us. So we kill the difference and bring about a certain kind of death that has no afterlife. The paradox here, is that conflict too will destroy us – or at least, destroy what we believe to be true. The death of our assumptions, judgments, worldviews through conflict can reveal what else is possible and may be true. We can discover that we and others are, in fact, so much more than we once thought; and capable of much more, way beyond the horizons of our previous imagination. Death, through the fire of difference understood, has a transformative potential, bringing forth new life.

¹ Dynamical is a term from complexity sciences used to describe change that occurs as a result of the playing out of an infinite and unknowable number of factors. Dynamical change cannot be predicted or controlled; it refers to change that is non-linear, ie is not based on simple ‘cause and effect’. In our non-linear world, the best we can hope to achieve is to anticipate or influence change by shifting certain conditions in the system. We can only do this by changing 3 basic conditions: the size of the ‘container’; the amount of ‘difference’ in the system; and the nature of the ‘exchanges’ between agents in the system.



inspiring leaders

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

Until we are able to face up to and sit with conflict, we will be unable to fully embrace and benefit from the joys of diversity. The old paradigms around teams suggest that what we should be aiming for is wonderfully harmonious groups who all get along beautifully. But this could be another shroud covering a value-preference for sameness that could be masking difference – often around power and rank. However sameness manifests (ranging from ‘sweetness’ to ‘fiery engagement’) there will be those who find themselves marginal to the group dialogue or process.

Sadly, in my time, I have been guilty of that delusion and unconscious collusion. And so, in the last few years, as I have consciously chosen to sit (and weep and scream and shake and despair) in the fire of conflict amidst deeply ‘imperfect’ groups, teams and relationships, I have come to an understanding of what embracing diversity might really mean and feel like. To me, right now, it means working with, welcoming in and giving voice to the differences that manifest within me and amongst us; and then seeing what unfolds beyond this. It can be messy, disturbing, scary, annoying, hilarious, traumatic, joyful and so much more besides. What it has been delivered to me is revelation, creativity, joy, and profound connection borne out of a deep appreciation of other who are so fundamentally unlike me. After so many years of running from it, I have finally learned to be still in its midst and to open up to listening to the deeper call and intention that may be shouting or even screaming to be heard, acknowledged, understood, trusted and loved.

SIGNAL-SPOTTING

So when I find myself avoiding conflict that emerges because of differences that show up between myself and another, I remind myself I am showing a value-preference for sameness. When I talk about another person being difficult or challenging; I know I am implying that ‘being like me’ would be better, easier and in so doing, I show a value-preference for sameness. In spotting my behaviours, I open up more choices for action.

If there is ONE thing I have truly understood from my time in being involved with ‘Inspiring women leaders... Dare we?’ is how vital it is we embrace difference – and how vital it is we develop our capacities to stay in the fire with each other long enough to let alchemy have its way with us. Then, and only then, can we lay claim to being one who is truly able to honour and play powerfully and creatively with diversity. I’m still learning and because I do not want to die in a sea of sameness before my time with no chance of rising up from spark-filled ashes, I choose to keep playing.

And so to come back to the question that is the title of this article: ‘Playing with diversity: Pain or Pleasure?’ How is it for you?

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To explore how an understanding of human systems dynamics can transform how you work with your leaders, organisations and communities, contact: Louie Gardiner, the only Certified HSD Professional in Scotland and one of only 12 in the UK

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