

Leveraging Diversity: Putting Our Differences to Work

by Joel Barker and Debbe Kennedy

The topic of diversity has been an ongoing challenge to every facet of modern society. Regardless of our unique perspectives, looking out at the world around us, into our organizations and communities, it is easy to see that the struggle between *sameness* and *difference* is one we all own at some

level. The most dramatic examples are easy to spot. Many groups have sent echoing messages, “If you aren’t just like me, go away!” Or even worse. We’ve watched it in Serbia, Japan, Afghanistan, Germany and in the United States. No matter what the outward appearances, all these groups and individuals have one characteristic in common: a deep fear of differences. Perhaps, what is more difficult for us to recognize and accept are the more subtle fears of difference that permeate most of our lives and consequently, most of our organizations. Why do we wrestle with *sameness* and *difference* as people and as organizations, especially when we have so much to gain by working together? Scientist and author, George Land offered a powerful explanation in his book, *Grow or Die*. It is his contention that all things, grow and develop within the same three-stage pattern.

For example, we start out focused on our own survival, seeking love, food and security. In our second stage of growth, starting at adolescence, we begin finding others like us. There are many advantages here. We are validated by others like us. We can accomplish things better together. Since we all talk alike and think alike, decisions and communications are easier. All of these similarities also increase the level of predictability within our group. We learn to like it. We see equivalent patterns of replication in many of today’s organizations for the very same reasons. So the struggle between *sameness* and *difference* is universal. It is part of the evolution of individual and organizational growth—and it is clear as we move into the 21st Century, it is time for us as individuals and as organizations to reach for a new stage of

growth. George Land calls this 3rd stage of growth—*Mutualism*. In this stage, we come together in new and different combinations to open the way for new innovations, new technology, new music, new art, new businesses, new friendships, new cultures and new opportunities to grow. Simply put, all of us—east and west—north and

south have to choose between two pathways and this choice has to be made at every level and in every organization of our society. One way leads us back where *sameness* is rewarded and *differences* are demonized. The other path is toward organizations and communities where diversity, variety and difference are prized. Why is this so important to our future? Because the people most likely to bring us the paradigm-shifting innovations we need to create new wealth are almost always *outsiders*, someone who knows little or nothing about the normal way of doing things. People different from us. This is true at every level of every enterprise, community and country. New wealth is the result of innovation. And innovation is driven by diversity. Diversity is the key that will open the door to the new wealth of the 21st Century.

Sameness or Difference

What does your organization value?

Seven Telling Signs

- Your leadership team at all levels (including the board) lacks diversity.
- Old notions, perceptions, preferences and prejudices still exist, unchallenged.
- Every group or team has its own agenda; efforts are fragmented.
- People who are different are rarely hired, developed, promoted or included.
- New ideas and new thinking are subtly shunned with cynicism, risk aversion and exclusion.
- You say you value diversity and inclusion, but your actions speak louder.
- Diversity and inclusion are dismissed as human resource issues; instead of the drivers of innovation and new wealth.

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Notes: *Grow or Die*, George Land, Leadership 2000, Inc. 1986



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