

Appendix 8 Why diversity matters

Jeanne Smuts, Human Development Africa

What is diversity and why does it matter? In some parts of the world, 'diversity' became just another word for 'difference'. In many societies and groups, ideas are developed of what is 'normal', 'good', 'valued', 'acceptable'. For example, in some societies, the acceptable and valued way of greeting another person is to kiss him or her on both cheeks. In other societies, any physical contact between strangers and especially strange men and women is not acceptable.

In situations where people with different ideas of what is acceptable behaviour came together, a growing demand developed to manage these relationships more effectively. In some circles, this practice of managing relationships is referred to as diversity management.

However, the focus on 'difference' as something to be managed also created the impression that differences were problematic and had to be minimised or tolerated. We live on a continent where a different understanding of diversity existed many years back. There lived a people called the /Xam who had a saying in their Khoisan language, *!ke e: /xarra //ke*, literally meaning 'diverse people unite'. As people living close to the earth and animals and other natural resources, they valued diversity. They knew that each plant, each insect, each mineral and all the creations of earth had a *specific purpose* in the bigger system of life. Each creature's life and the resources of the earth served other creatures. When a child was born, the people celebrated and supported the child to find out in which special way he or she could use his or her gifts to serve the people and the earth. *Service gave meaning and value to life.*

The diversity ensured the survival of all, so the /Xam people knew they were the guardians of the earth and its resources. They saw the disastrous effects on the system of living where each part of that life system depended on another if one of its diverse resources or creatures were affected in such a way that it could not fulfil its purpose. The /Xam had an *abundance mentality* and believed there were *enough resources* for all the inhabitants of earth. They only took what they needed to survive, to leave enough for the other creatures of the earth.

These people knew that diversity was not only about differences, it was also about seeing the interconnections and similarities between what seemed different. We also

have something else here in Africa that Bishop Tutu calls 'the gift that Africa is going to give to the world' (quoted in Mbigi 2005: 20–21).

Ubuntu means 'I am a person through other persons' or 'I am because you are, you are because we are' (Khosa 2004). This is the basis of self and community identities: it is with this understanding that each person *finds purpose through their unique relationship with other people, their unique contribution to the human community.*

As an online facilitator, one of the biggest challenges is to encourage and manage the participants' desire to engage and contribute. The online environment is for many people still a space where they feel vulnerable. Some feel vulnerable, because there is no face-to-face interaction, others because they might be new to some of the technology or because what is written in print stays there for a long time and is seen by many people.

Trust forms the basis of our drive to contribute and engage online and trust is even referred to as the glue of relationships. The basis of a lack of trust is fear, lack of confidence and a feeling of suspicion. Building an online community where there is open and enthusiastic interaction by as many as possible of the participants requires of the facilitator to be a trust and relationship builder.

So, for some of us, when we join a new group, there might be that question: 'Will they include, accept and value me? Can I show all of who I am to them?' It is the task of the facilitator to help create an enabling and safe environment where people will feel safe enough to engage as their authentic selves.

So how does a facilitator do that? The first step requires the facilitator to develop greater self-awareness about his or her own needs, beliefs, behaviours. It is important to model the behaviour and engage with participants as your authentic self. Having developed self-knowledge through enhanced self-awareness will help you to show your real self in interactions.

Step two is to develop your awareness of your course participants. You need to make an effort to understand their specific needs and how they are similar and different to you. For example, you might be a person who finds it easy to interact and you might experience a participant as a bit quiet or hesitant to participate. Instead of making assumptions or putting too much pressure on that individual, it might be a good idea to find out what he or she needs to participate

more easily. It is also important to show respect and to validate the different contributions of participants.

Step three is to encourage participants to move beyond the safe spaces of who and what they know and to be open to new and different experiences. One way of encouraging curiosity is to support participants to see the value that different ideas, perspectives and ways of doing things can add to group interaction.

Building relationships and trust has at its core: Can you understand and value what I need and contribute? Being able to recognise what you have in common with others

creates a sense of familiarity, a safe bridge across which you can then encounter the others and develop some trust to glue the relationship. On the other side of the bridge, it becomes easier to acknowledge what is different, to develop a better understanding which will contribute to the ability to see the value of those differences.

References

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