

interview

The challenge of diversity: Leadership across differences

An interview with the Center for Creative Leadership's Lily Kelly-Radford, Executive VP for Global Leadership Development, and Rudi Plettinx, Managing Director Europe.



Q: Diversity in the workplace seems to be discussed at political, management and human resources conferences and meetings across Europe. What is your definition of diversity?

Rudi Plettinx: Diversity in the workplace is a hot topic around the world – spurred by globalisation, technological advances, human rights legislation and increased migration. But Europe seems to be where discussions are most intense at the moment, in the face of social upheaval and conflicts, such as those that occurred recently in France.

Lily Kelly-Radford: At the Center for Creative Leadership, we have been looking over the past thirty years at emerging challenges facing leaders. At this point in time, we think that no challenge is of greater concern or complexity than the current need for effective leadership in the face of racial, gender, religious, ethnic and cultural differences.

RP: Traditional leadership approaches presume an environment in which people share a common culture and set of values. However, leaders must now effectively manage employees from a variety of social identity groups (including those defined by age and generation, as well as race, faith and gender).

Q: Are you saying that diversity in the workplace should be discouraged?

LKR: I think this is the core of the challenge – these differences are not just in the way people look or dress, but also in how they think and respond to issues and other people in their place of work. We have identified an atmosphere in diverse workplaces that mirrors tension over ethnic, racial, religious, gender and cultural differences prevalent in society at large. The most urgent question is not how to define and categorise diversity, but how to come up with leadership strategies that prevent or manage identity-based conflict.



“Connected leadership is an emerging view of leadership as an inclusive and collective networked activity occurring throughout organisations.”

André Martin

*The Changing Nature of Leadership:
A CCL Research Report*

Q: Can't a gifted or charismatic leader motivate people to rise above their differences and to pull together?

LKR: Relying strictly on charisma, leaders may ignore or paper over differences, thus losing out on perspectives that can enrich and inspire creativity. Purely charismatic leaders also run the risk of being ineffective in their ability to diffuse the conflicts that are brought into today's workplace, and those conflicts will erupt eventually with detrimental effects. Ignoring them makes them worse.

There are three basic characteristics of effective leaders: setting direction, creating alignment and gaining commitment. A strong leader might be able to set direction, but alignment and commitment will prove elusive as long as social identity-based conflict simmers and fosters mistrust.

The challenge of diversity: Leadership across differences (cont.)

Interview

There are 3 basic characteristics of effective leaders:

- **setting direction**
 - **creating alignment**
 - **gaining commitment**
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RP: Traditional approaches are going out of favour in today's culturally-complex organisations. CCL's Leadership across Differences (LAD) research project is trying to find new ways of addressing leadership challenges in culturally diverse organisations.

LKR: LAD has been designed as an 11-country study investigating leadership approaches for preventing or ameliorating social identity conflicts in organisations. This forms the basis for a framework of factors influencing leadership in situations where there is diversity arising from strong social identity. The analysis of the data allows for a rich interplay between national dynamics, social identity conflicts, organisational elements and leadership.

The researchers have developed a framework to understand identity based conflicts and potential leadership responses. The focus is on events which trigger conflicts and transform underlying tensions in society to full blown problems in organisations. We also looked at the leadership response to these triggers.

RP: Triggering events are important because these events bring tensions between social groups out to the forefront and create demands for leaders to respond.

A staggering example of the result of a triggering event in society was the recent rioting and violence in France. The accidental death of a teenager fanned underlying tensions and resentments into a major conflagration.

Q: Do you see parallels in the workplace?

LKR: On a smaller scale, yes, but the feelings can be just as intense. And the damage to the organisation can be substantial. The CCL team conducted a pilot investigation into the embedded leadership challenges in organisations characterised by global, ethnic, religious or racial diversity. They asked people from various countries to describe an experience they had with a social identity conflict at work. The interviews focused on the cause of the conflict, the way it unfolded, and the leadership

response (or lack of response). They ended up with a total of 30 stories taking place in the US, Israel, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Mozambique, Zambia and Germany.

Six types of triggers were identified:

- difference in values,
- insulting remarks or humiliating actions,
- assimilation,
- differential treatment,
- simple contact,
- exclusion.

Q: Could you give examples?

LKR: Yes, several:

Different values – tensions often surface between members of different groups when there are discussions of right and wrong. In some organisations, there were situations where employees were asked to take on an assignment or task that violated deeply-held religious beliefs such as those regarding abortion or homosexuality.

Assimilation was a trigger when a majority group expected the non-dominant group to be like them. There were examples dealing with music, language, food, and personal hygiene in which members of the dominant group criticised the habits of a non-dominant group. For example, in one school, immigrant students were criticised for listening to music from their homeland.

Insults include comments such as "you people" or public embarrassment of someone in light of group membership.

Exclusion has to do with using a particular language or celebrating a particular holiday or experience that excludes others. An example would be holding an after-hours networking session in a "gentlemen's club" with scantily clad dancers. Female or gay male staff members might be invited but wouldn't feel comfortable going along.

Differential treatment serves to maintain one group's privilege and power relative to another one. Examples include performance appraisals and promotions that favour one group over another and an unequal application of punishments. In Saudi Arabia we found an illustration of this where a senior executive who was a member of a certain tribe seemed expected

to take care of fellow tribal members at the expense of those who belonged to other tribes.

Simple contact can be a trigger when groups that have highly charged conflicts in society at large are brought together in the work place. We saw examples of this in South Africa and the Gaza Strip.

Q: Have you found any solutions or actions that leaders can take?

LKR: One universal element is that employees everywhere want to be treated with respect on an everyday basis. Leaders can ensure that the environment is such that employees feel respected. How they do that may vary from country to country. We have also found that apologies can go a long way to diffusing these situations.

The "connected leadership" approach

RP: Organisational policies and procedures can also help alleviate the conflict. Policies against discrimination and harassment can have an impact – although backlash against "political correctness" may make it difficult to gain acceptance of such policies.

The bottom line is that in every country, ignoring a social identity conflict is seen as harmful.

LKR: The challenges leaders are facing go beyond their individual capabilities, and these challenges result in a greater reliance on inter-dependent work across boundaries. Findings of the Changing Nature of Leadership (CNL) project also indicate that Europe is ahead of the USA in this "connected leadership" approach. Perhaps Europe will also lead the rest of the world in managing and harnessing the incredible energy of diversity. We believe that if you change leaders, you can change organisations, and if you change organisations, you can change society.