



Plucked out of Culture

Today, for the most part, our working relationships are determined by a culture of individualism. Organizations and groups are viewed as collections of individuals, devoid of family, history, and culture. Historically people were expected to leave behind ties to culture, place and heritage in order to enter the middle-class. This trade-off has been resisted by those who have historically been kept out. In response to discrimination people have created cultures affirming their sense of themselves and their collective identity. Part of the strength of these cultures is that they provide people with the capacity to reject the trade-off. No longer willing to “fit in” individuals from oppressed groups are beginning to reshape working life.

We each simultaneously embody individual and cultural experience. For people imbedded in the middle-class, this is a difficult concept to grasp precisely because their culture emphasizes individuality. Everybody stands alone, an individual plucked from any cultural, social, and historical context. In multicultural settings, middle-class acculturated people express this attitude by wanting to be treated as the exception to the history and practice of their group. Men acknowledge sexism, but want to be seen individually as fair, whites acknowledge racism, but want to be trusted as an individual who has moved beyond it. Few see that the ability to be seen as an individual, without connection to one’s social group, is solely a function of privilege.

In the larger society, a woman on the side of the road in a broken down car is vulnerable, no matter what her professional status; an African American teenager in a store is followed by a security guard, no matter what his intent; or a person who uses a wheel chair is treated as though she cannot think for herself. When one is used to mistreatment, trust is never a given. In middle-class culture, personal trust is a prerequisite for working together; when shifting to a multicultural atmosphere, expectations need to be adjusted. In diverse settings, trust is something to be

The Dynamics of Tokenism

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earned by the choices and actions of everyday life.

Middle class people who genuinely want others to share their perspectives can never assume that this interest will be perceived or trusted. When people have years of experiencing being devalued within the larger society, a continual demonstration of being taken seriously is needed for them to be willing to share their views and contribute fully. Trust grows from shared work; it can never be assumed across boundaries of race, class, gender, or...

Efforts to shift to multicultural processes are often met with two related comments: “Let’s just treat everyone as a human being and not get caught up in the things that divide us” or “Let’s just treat everyone as an individual.” These comments, intended to promote unity, create tokenism instead. Individuals with less social power are seen by those from dominant groups as either representatives of their entire group or as the exceptional individual, not like the rest of “them.” People from oppressed groups are frequently asked to characterize the viewpoint of their entire group—as though everyone of the group thinks the same. Because people don’t know others from the marginalized group they turn to the lone member and ask them. For example, a group of administrators ask the only African American in the office, “What do your people think of the situation in Haiti?” Or at a board meeting of a social service organization, turn to the one elder and ask “How will old people feel about this new policy?” Treating them as a representative of an entire marginalized group reduces their presence to little more than a stereotype. Their own individual experiences, skills, contributions and talents are lost behind the mask of tokenism. If on the other hand, they are treated as the “exceptional” individual of their group, the culture from which they come and the oppression they experience daily are rendered invisible at best, or viewed as exotic and disadvantaged, they are heroes who have managed to leave it behind.

Individuals are embedded in their cultures. The sharp distinction between individual identity and cultural integrity which runs through middle-class life usually creates a kind of schizophrenia for members of

marginalized groups. Either they lose their individuality and become token representatives of their entire culture, or they maintain their individuality and suppress their sense of cultural identity. Yet for the most part, people from marginalized groups gain identity and pride from their group. Witnessing and being a part of “making a way out of no way,” strength, courage and innovation are experienced as deeply entwined with their cultural identity. On the other hand, those from the middle-class have been socialized to disassociate from any group identity and to view groups with suspicion because they are the very thing that stands in the way of advancement. For those from oppressed groups their collective identity provides strength. For those of the middle class it takes it away.

When members of oppressed groups have to choose between individuality and group identity it is a no-win situation that entrenches the monoculture. If a person chooses individuality it becomes extremely difficult to maintain ties to their own community. They look different but act the same as the rest in the organization. If on the other hand, they choose to preserve their cultural identity, they find themselves both isolated in the organization and facing perpetual resistance to their claiming of cultural identity. They eventually leave the organization, leaving behind a monoculture.

Overcoming Tokenism

To overcome tokenism, we need to create organizational cultures that enable everyone to claim both their individual and their cultural integrity. For this reason it is vital to have a number of people from any particular group, or to build alliances with groups rooted in different communities. This makes it clear that everyone from the same group is not the same. It also overcomes much of the isolation that people from oppressed groups feel when they are in a minority position.

People need space and time to gather with others of their own group. When people from a minority group put forward their desire to meet separately, it is met with great resistance by everyone else. Other people feel left out, deprived of the opportunity to get to know those different from themselves. It also invariably brings up feelings that they

must be doing something wrong, or people from the minority group would not need to meet by themselves. Yet a caucus creates a context for mutual support for individuals who are likely to be alienated. It creates a safe place to be able to express the sensibilities rooted in their particular cultural experience. Here there is no need to choose between remaining silent or carefully explaining things so as not to provoke hostility or defensiveness—one doesn't have to choose between self and group identity. In a caucus setting, people share the same cultural norms and an unspoken understanding of the day-to-day difficulties faced in the larger organization. They can let down their guard. Spontaneity emerges and with it innovative thinking that the whole organization gains from. It provides a place in which they don't have to leave their identity at the door and try to fit in. Instead, their difference becomes a source of strength and the particularity of their cultural experience is affirmed and energized. This spills into the To shift into organizational modes that embrace multiple cultural experiences we need to develop processes that enable us to share our wholeness. Our connectedness with one another is strengthened when people share their stories which bring out differing sensibilities and engage openly and completely in creating common goals, values and visions.

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This makes visible the hidden barriers that block our ability to work together effectively. It's full of concrete strategies for creating a context that welcomes everyone's contributions.

--Sister Guadalupe Guajardo

A very important piece of work for both emerging and established organizations. Although it's good for individuals, it's best to study it collectively and use it for training programs.

--Richard Moore

Transform Organizational Culture

so everyone contributes their best.

Tools for Change offers training, consulting, mediation and facilitation services on justice issues and the bringing together of history, heart, spirit, values, and vision. We create a respectful atmosphere in which power, history and culture are openly addressed. When we share our stories and full perspectives, we discover how to heal the schisms across the lines of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and physical ability. This enables everyone to transform guilt, blame, and distrust into supportive and creative relations, power dynamics and tokenism are replaced by an open, multicultural and democratic context.

Tools for Change helps organizations develop and implement innovative policies and practices that advance cooperation, creativity, trust, democracy and accountability. Our associates have are experienced in personal and community empowerment, diversity issues, leadership development, mediation and facilitation. We are diverse in our skills, race, ethnic and class backgrounds, sexual orientation, and physical abilities.

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Reclaims wholeness
Builds trust
Draws out mutual support
Where differences widen horizons
Inspires integrity and respect
Fosters principled relationships
Establishes democratic processes
People enjoy one another
Is innovative
Is productive
Is visionary

ORGANIZATIONS WE HAVE WORKED WITH:

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Rural Women's Resources
Jesuit Volunteer Corps
National Gay & Lesbian Task Force
California Assc. of AIDS Agencies
Interfaith Center for Racial Justice
SEIU, Local 535
The Family Center
Planned Parenthood
Lesbian & Gay Coalition Against DV

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