



# German Leadership Dates Diversity

The **Red** Knowggets



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## A Long Way From Loaning Words to Leading Change

In Germany, diversity has recently strongly been associated with two major headlines: women's quotas and a growing need for an international workforce due to an increasing skills shortage. Both topics are directly related to demographic changes in modern society. They clearly show how closely developments in business and society are intertwined, much more so than we may be aware of in everyday life. Their asynchronous learning curves in this area is a matter of serious concern to me.

**The tension between troubled and unfortunate debates on migration and an economy asserting diversity increases the challenge for organizations and leaders to deal with diversity.**

**Forgive him, for he believes  
that the customs of his tribe  
are the laws of nature.**

**George Bernard Shaw**

The efforts made by German corporations to improve their international talent management and to become more attractive employers for an international workforce is accompanied by a rising frustration with regard to the integration of migrants in Germany. We are experiencing an increasing social awareness of the difficulties and challenges related to migration. The German summer tale of World Cup 2010 was followed by a cold fall with discouraging racist debates about Muslim migrant groups in Germany. In 2011, severe murder cases by a right-wing terror group killing several migrants over a period of ten years were uncovered.



At the same time, many German corporations pursue a rather assertive case for diversity and inclusion challenging their employees to face issues of exclusion and to develop an advanced competence in dealing with cultural differences. This poses a considerable challenge for diversity and inclusion trainings and for developing inclusive organizational cultures.

The business case for diversity has increasingly been taken seriously by German companies since the beginning of the millennium (Köppel & Sandner, 2008). The financial crises of the past years have also strengthened efforts for corporate social responsibilities (see documentation of the Hernstein Symposium 2011).

Among the recognized benefits of diversity management are: access to new markets, greater adaptability and flexibility, synergy, innovation, cost reduction of discrimination with respect to potential legal conflicts, and greater attraction for talents based on improved employer branding (see, e.g., Cox 1993; Güldenber, 2010; Fischer, 2007; Roland Berger Strategy Consultants, 2011).

# Diversity has made a rapid career in Germany from loanword to mission.

## Some historical notes on the concept of multiculturalism and diversity

One of my clients in public administration once asked me to give a short introduction on diversity during a leadership training. The innocent customer wish was that diversity may not be a foreign term to the participants by the end of the event. What a beautiful paradox, I thought, and responded with a personal narrative about my own relationship to the topic.

When I studied organizational and cultural communication at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1989/90, I also took a class on multicultural education with Prof. James Banks. The US-American concept of multiculturalism was much wider than what was associated with this term in Germany at the time (cf. Soraya, 1994).

The movement of multicultural education goes back to the various civil rights movements in the USA starting with the black civil rights movement in the 60s, followed by the protest movement of the Vietnam war veterans who fought for the rights of people with disabilities. The women's movement joined in the 70s, so did the gay movements, today uniting interests of gays, lesbian, bisexuals and transgender. The awareness that these various movements have common interests that had to be defended against a dominant culture of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants WASPs, led to a common position advocating the rights of (almost) all marginalized groups (Banks & Banks, 1989, Banks 2004).

When I returned to Germany the term "multicultural" was primarily used in debates about the multicultural society, a term conceptually occupied by the Greens. A pioneer was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, former Councillor for the Frankfurt Office of Multicultural Affairs (Wolf-Almanasreh, 1993). However, representatives of conservative parties, such as Heiner Geißler, were also devoted to this topic (Geißler & Rommel, 1992). The primary focus of the debate, however, was on migrants and their primarily national, ethnic, religious affiliations. At this time, gender discrimination ran under different headlines and had by no means the current prominence.

Social minorities or marginalized groups such as elder workers, people with physical or mental differences were not included. Even in the context of multicultural education in the US, sexual orientation was still quite a taboo (personal communication, Prof. James A. Banks, 1990).

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During the 90ies, this narrowed focus of multiculturalism on immigrants was not to be corrected soon. After the fall of the Berlin wall, Germany was preoccupied with its own integrating of East and West Germany, a process still on its way and not a very big success story so far.

The first time I encountered the concept of „diversity“ in Germany was during a breakfast in a hotel near Frankfurt in 1998. My table neighbors were US-American HR experts participating in their international HR conference of the Deutsche Bank, which had acquired Morgan Grenfell in 1992.

They desperately asked me for some advice on how they could explain "diversity" to their German colleagues "who did not even know how to spell it". I could understand their perplexity only too well.

Only as a consequence of the growing internationalization and due to EU legislation did diversity find its way into the human resource departments of German corporations.

Diversity and its related concepts - "Diversity Management", "Management of Diversity", or more recently "Diversity and Inclusion" - have indeed made rapid careers in Germany over the past fifteen years. It has been a journey starting out as a loanword, sometimes translated as "Vielfalt", leading to advanced strategic concepts of considerable change in the organizations (Aretz & Hansen, 2002; Koall, Bruchhagen & Höher, 2002, Krell 2007; Sepehri & Wagner, 1999).

Although the term is more commonly used in Germany today, it is nevertheless not very well understood (Darrah, Jammal, Leistikow, 2011).

So, in spite of the fact that many organizations in Germany have moved diversity from the status of minor HR programs to be part of their business strategy broadening the concept of diversity to include all kinds of differences, it is still mainly associated with discrimination and equal rights for minorities and especially the quota debate about women in leadership (Soraya-Kandan, 2010).

This view of diversity, however, corresponds to a rather defensive approach of dealing with differences which does not at all do justice to the complexity of diversity and its relevance as a strategic goal for organizations (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

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## Traps and challenges in practicing diversity management

This brings us to the very traps related to different perspectives on diversity. Thomas & Ely's (1996; see also Ely & Thomas, 2001) distinction of three main „paradigms“ of diversity management, though not recent, is still a valid and useful frame for reflection:

Discrimination and Fairness	Access-and-legitimacy	Learning and Effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Primary focus: Equality</li><li>• Economic considerations not beyond avoiding judicial costs</li><li>• Differences are denied. Assimilation is the dominant orientation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Diversity as strategic instrument to access new markets</li><li>• Danger of (mis)using social identities and their resources</li><li>• Differences are overemphasized and exaggerated</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highlighting the possible benefits of differences</li><li>• Learning from differences</li><li>• Leveraging differences for collaboration and for the tasks of the organization</li></ul>

The **Discrimination and Fairness** perspective has as primary objective equal treatment. Economic considerations do not go beyond avoiding judicial costs. The objective of equal treatment even leads to a negation of differences. Assimilation is the dominant orientation, even at the costs of appreciating differences. In conclusion, this is a rather defensive approach for dealing with diversity.

The perspective of **Access-and-legitimacy** sees diversity as a strategic instrument to access and develop new markets. For this purpose, differences are highlighted. It bears the danger of (mis)using social identities and their resources; i.e. limiting people to their differences, or not using their resources (i.e. repatriates). Differences are highlighted and styled. The dangers of this approach are inter alia in the limited use of socio-cultural identities and their resources. Employees who are employed in such contexts are often limited in their career paths. Their development is not brought to full bloom as the organization does not recognize any further use for their specific skills and experience. This is for example a common complaint for those returning from overseas assignments. Dealing with diversity is characterized here by an exaggerating and conventionalizing set of distinctions.

The **Learning and Effectiveness** perspective is a more advanced approach and is also relevant for current developments towards implementing diversity strategy. It highlights the possible benefits of differences conceding its downsides, failures, and risks. Using differences for collaboration, innovation processes and for redefining the tasks of the organization would allow learning from the differences, not only „managing“ them. There has been an increasing awareness that this learning needs to take place on the level of individuals, groups, and the organization as a whole (Davidson, 2011).

You will potentially find all three perspectives in an organization. Different units, and employees may employ different paradigms depending on their commitment and experience with the issues.

# Culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin.

## Edgar H. Schein

While the first two perspectives focus on differences - negating differences in the first case, leveling, stylizing them in the second - the third perspective directs attention to the possible gain: learning from differences and utilizing them. The resulting benefits affect both the social dimensions, as e.g. in leading employees and supporting collaboration, as well as the business dimensions of leadership, as e.g. the strategy development of the organization.

According to my observations, you often find elements of all three perspectives simultaneously in an organization (see also Köppel, Yuan & Luedecke, 2007). Depending on the how deeply departments, leaders, and employees have come to terms with the issue, they adopt different perspectives (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

This third perspective is adopted when diversity is part of a corporate strategy. The implementation of this orientation is however full of preconditions. Adopting and implementing the integrative third paradigm affects the organization as a whole. It suggests that on a deeper structural level of the organization diversity implies "not only working on the forms of cooperation, but also on the functional relationships of structures in organizations ..." (Koall, 2002, p. 12). This requires a long-term developmental process of employees and change of the organizational culture.

If one understands diversity as a culture change that affects the self-concept of the organization in its core, diversity and leadership must be coupled: "[For] culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin" (Schein, 2008, p.3).

The orientation towards an integrative perspective as learning-and-effectiveness can only succeed if managers will be both required to lead inclusively and supported in developing a respective competence of inclusion of diversity. This must begin with top management (see Cox, 2003).

# GERMAN ECONOMY GOING PINK!?

In international comparisons one finds marked differences with respect to the awareness of diversity and the respective levels of maturity in dealing with diversity issues. In an interesting study Köppel, Yan, Lüdicke (2007) compare the various strategic approaches and measures, what benefits were seen in diversity management, and which typical barriers were described in the implementations. They come to the conclusion



particularly interesting and alarming in the wake of current economic and political challenges and debates. Their own national and ethnic diversity is not at all perceived accurately. Furthermore, neither the necessity of dealing with diversity nor its potential benefits are sufficiently acknowledged.

that Germany "is lagging behind ... across all statements collected in this survey (p. 18).

These cultural differences in dealing with diversity clearly demonstrated in the Allianz' call for a pink economy last summer. It prompted both surprise and amusement, depending on how much the respective audience is already accepting and practicing diversity:

„We introduced the topic of diversity already 15 years ago at Ford in Germany. Diversity is an evident element in our corporate philosophy. Dealing with sexual orientation without prejudices is part of that.“

Brigitte Kasztan, Manager at Ford Germany (Handelsblatt 3. August 2011 p. 7; translation by Semira Soraya-Kandan).

Köppel, Yan, Lüdicke (2007) certify Germany to have a distorted self-image, an analysis that is

This juxtaposition of requirements for the inclusion of diversity and its status description for German corporations results in one fundamental challenge: to better understand the meaning of culture.

**We get together on the basis of our similarities; we grow on the basis of our differences.**

**Virginia Satir**

### **Comprehending Culture**

One major stumbling block in the implementation of diversity and inclusion as strategic goals with an emphasis on learning, effectiveness and leveraging differences is the uncritical use of the term and its implicit assumptions about diversity and cultural differences.

Fischer (2007) points out that lack of a leading definition for diversity management. Sometimes diversity simply means heterogeneity, other times it refers to specific characteristics of people. Sometimes it indicates the appreciation of diversity, then again the associated management tools. We find here a similar confounding of descriptive and normative terminology - a parallel to the debate over multiculturalism (cf. Soraya, 1994). Both academic and popular scientific publications are frequently inconsistent in this respect.

Over the time we could witness a gradual extension of the term, up to a dilution where any kind of difference is taken to be relevant for diversity management (Loden, 1996; Sepehri, 2002). Some authors therefore sometimes use additives, such as "cultural diversity" in order to distance themselves from too broad a terminology.

So what are we to do with such hard to grasp concepts?

One reason why anthropologists can easily be pointed out at conferences is that they are the ones who mostly avoid using the word culture (John Gumperz quoted in Agar, 1994). As sociologist, Dirk Baecker (2003) refers however to its social function. In both cases, its diffusivity is detected. Though the pragmatic approach renders it useful by recognizing that culture "will be read and understood" both in spite of and because of this characteristic (p. 9). The complexity of the diversity concept as a modern answer to a traditional concept of culture may be too demanding. It allows, however, for something that makes culture to be a very attractive subject matter: the comparison. This means, above all, the comparison with oneself, and with the various fractions of oneself. For organizations, this opens up the possibilities to compare themselves with their own having come into being as well as their future options for coming to be (see Koall, 2002).

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The terminological reflection shows that the creation and choice of meaning of the respective diversity perspectives and approaches has implications for the way in which diversity can act as a formative vision.

If diversity is taken too narrowly and prioritizes only few dimensions, there is a risk of excluding groups (Stuber, 2004). Taken very broadly, however, integrating also personal psychological factors, e.g. cognitive styles and motivational structures, there is a risk of arbitrariness about what diversity means.

Cognitive differences or other visible differences also prone to discrimination like e.g. red hair have less relevance for the formation of one's social identity than socio-cultural backgrounds or race (cf. Davidson, 2011). Although in the context of staffing cognitive differences may very well be of competitive advantage, a dilution of the term disguises the contentious aspects associated with various types of differences in terms of socio-economic privilege and exclusion. Employees' social backgrounds are a much larger barrier today than, e.g. a left-handedness for inclusion in the work context (Hartmann, 2002; also cf. [„Hart, aber fair!“ 12.09.2011](#)).

The way we work and cooperate is significantly influenced by various aspects of identity-related differences, which mostly arise from our allegiances or relatedness to distinct socio-cultural groups. These group memberships influence people in their cultural orientations and affect norms, values, goals, communication styles, rules, patterns of behavior that are relevant to the work context (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

That these differences are socio-culturally shaped is not always recognized, there are also large variations within these cultural groups. People in modern societies are subject to various influences and strong tendencies of individualization. Therefore, people will identify with their respective socio-cultural groups to varying degrees and behave more or less flexibly in changing or shifting these identities (Kochman, Mavrelis, 2009; Philipsen, 2007, 2010)

The culture concept underlying diversity approaches is thus social-constructivist, complex and dynamic (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Koall, 2001; Soraya, 1994, 1998). Therefore, people cannot unequivocally be related to predefined categories (Meulenbelt, 1987). The attribution of certain group membership is particularly problematic, not least in terms of identity processes of people with migration biographies (see Bennett, 1996; Foroutan & Schaefer, 2009; Wippermann & Flaig, 2009).

We need a critical engagement with the concepts of culture (Baecker, 2002) and diversity that allows a dynamic oscillation between identity-related education and individualization processes (Straub, 1999, 2000).

Comprehending culture has less to do with categorization, rather than with understanding people in their diverse uniqueness: social understanding of multiple localizations, of balancing multiple identities and processing (biographical) changes.

We behave quite differently in different contexts. Less inclusive organizations require higher degrees of adaption from their members in the course of inevitable processes of organizational acculturation. More inclusive organizational cultures allow their members to tap their social competencies from various other social contexts and bring them as additional resources to their work tasks.

This understanding offers the awareness that we all are multicultural. An approved principle in intercultural learning highlights the role of cultural



self-awareness as an important element in one's own competency development (Bennett, 2004; Hammer, 2003. Building on the awareness of their own cultural traces, on their own multiculturalism, employees and leaders can be guided to important cultural blind spots. This also allows for an understanding of one's own privileges respectively one's own experiences as being

marginalized. Comprehending culture in this sense, facilitates a view on diversity in a way that it affects everyone and the organization as a whole.

Every vision fit to form a sustainable future requires acknowledging the presence. This is the foremost task for leadership, if it wants to go beyond dating diversity.

**Always remember you're  
unique, just like  
everyone else.**

**Margaret Mead**

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