The Paradox of Diversity in Social Change Organizations

Heather Berthoud and Bob Greene

Many social change organizations demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion by serving a range of constituencies; having diverse members, staff, and/or boards; and working in broad coalitions. The importance of diversity may also be expressed in an organization's mission, policy, and strategic and program plans. Social change advocates often speak eloquently and forcefully about historical trends and the legal enshrinement of bigotry, how those acts affect us today, and the cultural assumptions that drive social trends. Yet even with clearly positive intentions, patterns of bias and oppression may exist within social change organizations. In this essay, we offer our observations based on work with numerous organizations as both activists and consultants.

With the extent of racism and other forms of oppression in society at-large, it is impossible for social change organizations to be islands of virtue. Oppression does not stop at the office door. We are still formed by the world we live in, even if we want to change it for the better. Given years of socialization and the pervasiveness of stereotypes, having a political analysis of oppression does not inexorably lead to changed behaviors or eliminated biases. Even in social change organizations, inequalities subtly, and not so subtly, creep into the workings of the organization.
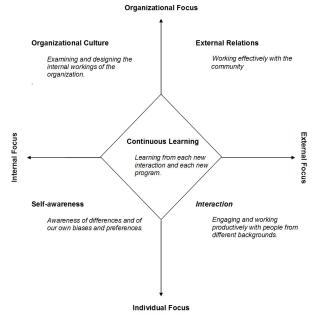
Ironically one major obstacle to seeing oppression at work internally is the belief that, "We're the good guys - we disagree with it (racism, sexism, homophobia etc) - we can't *be* it" To be seen as behaving in ways that support the very dynamics social change advocates oppose can create an intolerable dissonance. An expressed commitment to social justice in the world can, therefore, become a way to resist looking critically at *internal* dynamics, at both the personal and organizational levels.

So there is a paradox. Social change activists, committed to justice with sophisticated policy analyses and good intentions, often resist looking at inequities within the organizations they run, or how *their own* behavior helps maintain those inequalities. With the collective focus typically on the external (to the organization) causes of social problems, and on serving external constituencies, both the problem and solution are identified with '*them*', while the activists remain the heroes of their own story. In terms of the Diversity Diamond © model (Berthoud & Greene, 2001), the focus of many change advocates is predominately on *External Relations*. Other facets of diversity, such as internal *Organizational Culture, Interaction* between group members, personal *Self-Awareness, and Continuous Learning* receive much less attention. When the dynamics of diversity inside the organization are not addressed, group members can unwittingly duplicate the very systems that they oppose.

The Diversity Diamond ©

Organizational Focus

Organizational Culture

Examining and designing the internal workings of the organization.

External Relations

Working effectively with the community

Internal Focus

External Focus

Continuous Learning

Learning from each new interaction and each new program.

Self-awareness

Awareness of differences and of our own biases and preferences.

Interaction

Engaging and working productively with people from different backgrounds.

Individual Focus

A focus on external issues is not surprising, since social change organizations are in the business of creating change in the world. There is often less interest in internal organizational issues - attention to internal matters is often belittled as a distraction from the *real* work. Staff and managers may have analytical and technical experience and skills, but not necessarily the background or training in creating a welcoming organizational culture, and in leading employees.

In addition, many social change activists take an adversarial stance and employ confrontational tactics when facing entrenched, powerful, opponents. Very often, activists approach *internal* dynamics with similar confrontational methods. Mistrust of management or of co-workers is the norm in many organizations, a stance reflected in slogans such as "question authority" or "beat the man". Of course, *all* organizational stakeholders, including managers, must be held accountable. An organization with widespread mistrust and active or submerged conflict is in trouble, and in such an environment, diversity becomes another potential source for internal conflict.

But internal work is fundamentally different from externally-oriented advocacy or service. Skills in active listening, giving and receiving feedback, team building, conflict resolution, and the like, are often downplayed as 'soft' and 'irrelevant'. Yet diversity is not a campaign or argument to be won, nor is it a service to be administered to others. In fact, the adversarial, confrontational tactics of advocates, or the ministering approach of service organizations may thwart the very inclusion that these organizations profess to want.

THE PARADOX IN ACTION

The following are a few examples that we have witnessed of the paradox of diversity in social change organizations. While these dynamics are not necessarily limited to social change organizations, our focus here is on activist and service groups.

Denying privilege

Unrecognized privilege. Activists who work long hours for change, and who are, often, underpaid, not surprisingly may recoil from the fact that they have unearned privilege vis-à-vis colleagues due to skin color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other identity characteristics. For example, white men, whose cultural position leads to expectations that they will be listened to and respected, may frequently dominate discussions (a classic examination of the usually unacknowledged privilege experienced by white people can be found in Mcintosh, 1988). White heterosexual people in general are far less likely to be profiled, questioned, denied service, treated rudely, physically harassed, treated as 'the minority' in a group, or be the victim of any of the other myriad overt and covert acts of discrimination that people of color, and lesbian and gay people frequently report. Few white heterosexuals have taken the time to explore in-depth the ramifications of the access and expectations that they enjoy.

Identification as 'oppressed only'. Often people tend to downplay their privilege in one or more areas in favor of the ways in which they identify with, or see themselves, as being subordinated. White women, for instance, often readily see their gender disadvantage but may not be aware of their race privilege. Men of color often see their racial exclusion but not their male privilege. Women of color can band together without noting the benefits that accrue because of education and income level relative to their less educated and poorer counterparts. White men in the US who are not Christian may focus on the religious discrimination they face, and not attend to the access they gain due to their race and gender. And on and on. In organizations that stake their purpose with the disadvantaged, it is understandably difficult for members to claim the ways in which they have an advantage *and* that their privilege affects their actions. As a black man once said, without irony or sarcasm, to one of the authors when she was describing her interest in women's issues, "We treat our women well; they don't need to be liberated".

Institutionalized privilege. Unacknowledged privilege can be institutionalized in how an organization operates. For example, one primarily

white and middle-class organization successfully recruited several black, inner-city residents to join the group during a voter registration drive. Unfortunately because, in part, regular meetings were held in white, affluent, suburbs which were a substantial distance from their homes, few of these new members remained with the organization. The majority members did not recognize their privileges inherent in deciding where, when, and how to meet. The Diversity Diamond © model indicates that neither recruitment drives nor training by themselves will compensate for unchecked biases, unskilled interactions, inadequate policies and procedures, and, in general, a failure to learn about diversity on an ongoing basis.

Flawed attempts to do the right thing

Zealous converts. Privilege can play out in unexpected ways. On the one hand there are the zealous converts - individuals who have developed a political analysis and strong commitment to anti-oppression work, and who want to align their individual *behavior* with their analysis and commitment. Paradoxically, with good intentions, many become fervent, self-righteous, and over-bearing. In an extension of internalized privilege, they feel it is their right to tell all around how to do anti-oppression work *the right way*. For the zealous convert, no incident is too small, no slight inconsequential. They cannot imagine why people shrink away from them, often before they start to speak. One can almost hear their audiences: "Oh no, here we go again". For example, one of the authors participated in a discussion with white people who were creating a white, anti-racist affinity group. One participant was determined to teach the rest of the group the 'correct' analysis and 'best' way to take action, and only grudgingly entertained other options.

Walking on eggshells. Alternatively, many people - for example, white people and heterosexuals - may be fearful of how they approach some of their colleagues. They may fear saying the wrong things and being labeled racist, sexist, or heterosexist. This fear, which leads to 'walking on eggshells' - a general timidity and a lack of willingness to engage in diversity-related conversations - limits dialogue and may lead to practices such as men not providing the women they supervise with honest or relevant performance feedback. Ironically, this timidity comes from privilege - those who have enjoyed privilege are most likely to believe it is even *possible* to act and communicate perfectly. Fear of interaction is a way to remain silent and disengaged - a choice that those from historically dominant positions can make. It was pointed out to one of the authors (a white man) that he was silent

during a diversity discussion. Although he replied that he was respectfully listening, other group members wanted to know his views to determine whether he could be trusted as a potential ally - silence in this instance was not experienced as respectful.

Caution and cynicism. It is not only those with social privilege who help duplicate the larger society within change organizations. Systems and organizations work the way they do because everyone plays a part. Those who have been in the socially subordinated position - people of color; women; LGBT, ethnic and religious minorities; people with disabilities etc - may also play an unintended role in recreating a dynamic they are working to change. Not without reason, those who have experienced oppression may distrust those with greater privilege - there is suspicion that *this* change effort will also fail and *these* people will choose to leave when the going gets tough. Any real or perceived mistake or reticence by those with privilege may be vigorously confronted, often eliciting defensiveness and/or silence in response. Alternatively, transgressions may not be confronted at all. Rather they are seen as just the way 'they' are. The assumption, therefore, is reinforced that the person with privilege is not committed and will not do the work necessary to become an ally. The cycle of cynicism and avoidance is perpetuated and the potential for deeper understanding is missed.

Diminished program results

Fractured constituencies. The consequence of not paying attention to the impact of one's positions of privilege and/or disadvantage can be profound for social change movements. The white women's movement did not see how they were also contributing to the exclusion of women of color. The LGBT community is split along racial lines. People of color may join in solidarity regarding race but fracture along other lines such as class or sexual orientation. Thus, an organization's difficulty with addressing diversity issues internally is mirrored in its work with other organizations that represent constituencies different from their own. Social change movements that have not engaged in sufficient dialogue about internal inclusion dynamics have difficulty being coalition partners with diverse groups

Competition for crumbs. Splits among constituencies for change can lead to competition for limited resources. The current immigration debate illustrates this dynamic. In the United States, issues of poverty and racism remain serious and generally intertwined. They are also often construed to refer primarily to the concerns of African-Americans. And, certainly, the legacy of slavery and the extensive

past and current discrimination faced by African-Americans have not been fully addressed. At the same time, issues of global economic disparity, the exploitation of immigrant workers, and the related issues of dignity and economic survival have come to the fore of the national conversation. Where some might see common cause, others may see immigration as a distraction from long-standing anti-poverty and anti-discrimination work focused on African-American concerns. Conversations among identity groups about the perceived competition could benefit all involved, yet discussions rarely occur.

It is important to note the role of dominant group members. For example, people of color often avoid having frank discussions with other people of color in the presence of white people, for fear of 'hanging out our dirty laundry' in front of the dominant group. White people are seen as standing aloof, judging people of color ("See, they can't get along"), all the while retaining social and organizational privilege. Without considering their privilege and addressing diversity in a substantial way, white people may limit discussions among people of color. The same dynamic exists along other dimensions of dominance, for example, women being reluctant to discuss issues with other women in front of men.

A vicious cycle

All the dynamics described here can lead to cycles of silence alternating with conflict. Groups may work for long periods without substantive discussions of internal diversity dynamics (conversations do, of course, go on through the grapevine, as people construct their most-likely explanations for perceived inequalities and slights). In the absence of disconfirming information and open dialogue, people interact on their assumptions of each other. Eventually an incident sparks an explosion of pent-up emotions. Although the event could offer an opportunity to address perceived imbalances, many leaders ignore the challenge or try a quick fix, such as a half-day of diversity training. The result, therefore, is increased anxiety by whites and other historically advantaged identity groups; increased anger, and/or resignation among those historically marginalized; and a continuation of the vicious cycle.

Part of our job as consultants has been to assist organizations in breaking this cycle. In one example, a national organization that promotes healthcare for underserved populations embarked on strategic planning. In the course of gathering data, leaders learned that concerns about racial discrimination in

hiring, firing, and promotions were uppermost for many staff. We learned that at a full-staff retreat a few years prior, a heated racially-charged exchange occurred. Diversity was not a planned part of the agenda, and the facilitator had been stymied. The employees involved left the organization shortly after the retreat, sparking numerous explanations among staff, none of them giving management the benefit of the doubt. Many people of color harbored resentment and fear for their jobs (were the retreat antagonists pushed out?) while many white people walked on eggshells fearing they would ignite another 'explosion.'

With our support, they opened communication, reviewed policies using broad participation, and broke their silence about frustrations with the lack of advancement for people of color in the organization. In fact, standards for advancement and mobility were not clear and paths were not widely known. Such procedural murkiness advantaged those who were well-educated and/or well-connected in the system - typically white people. As a result, the organization researched and publicized the options for development and rewards, and identified processes for selection. In addition, management and staff increased their skills in having conversations about their cultural differences, the lack of which had prevented them from having these and other important discussions in the first place.

BRINGING SOCIAL JUSTICE HOME

When internal dynamics are ignored, little room is left for inquiry, puzzling, humility, forgiveness, or grace. There is little patience with others or oneself as all sides claim both rightness and righteousness. Everyone believes they are correct in their analysis and approach, which they defend as morally unassailable. So how can people strive for a different world while acknowledging that they are firmly raised in, and embodying, the old? The key is to embrace the paradox: even as we work for change, we are part of, and help to duplicate, an oppressive system. Even as we fight oppression *out there*, we can become aware of how we perpetuate or collude with inequities *within* our organizations. Once we embrace the paradox, we can do something about it; if we remain in denial, we continue the dynamics as they are. We have seen organizations be successful when they have done some or all of the following:

- *Make internal diversity work part of the work.* Encourage open communication about diversity, and discuss the paradox openly.
- *Focus on external results and effective management practices together.* How one accomplishes a task expresses deeply held values, including those that may be out of awareness. Paying attention to both external results and internal management means that the organization will be better aligned, and more effective in the long-run. Ensure inclusion of diverse voices in all phases of the organization's work - from strategy development through to implementation.
- *Learn and practice.* Engage in diversity learning opportunities that focus attention on privilege, unintentional bias, internalized oppression, and effective communication. Rather than a quick training session, recognize that this is a process that requires ongoing learning, reflection, and practice. Expect progress, not perfection.
- *Learn to track organizational patterns with a diversity lens.* Pay attention to who speaks and who remains silent at meetings; who leads; whose ideas seem to matter most; and who is typically hired, fired, and promoted. Are there recurring patterns of identity-group membership?
- *Learn skills of productive engagement.* Skills in dialogue, giving and receiving feedback, active listening, and getting in touch with one's emotional state etc are key to engaging productively regarding diversity.

CONCLUSION

The challenge is not merely to do different things, but to be different as we do these things. As Gandhi is reported to have said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world". Striving for justice in the world can go hand-in-hand with ensuring equity in our organizations. Rather than a distraction, embracing the paradox of diversity will support a model of what a new society can be. Without acknowledging and working with the paradox, we are left with actions that are well-meant but that can unwittingly perpetuate the patterns we want to break.

BIOGRAPHIES

Heather Berthoud, Principal of Berthoud Consulting, has been working with social change organizations as staff, volunteer, and consultant for more than 30 years. Her consulting supports the deep alignment between individual and organizational aspiration and daily practices. Whether working on individual coaching, team dynamics, leadership development, organizational change, or diversity and inclusion, she combines a passion for social justice with a practical results-orientation. Said one recent client, she is "a combination of strategic business thinker and Zen master."

Ms Berthoud holds a MS in Organization Development from American University and is faculty for that program. She is a member of NTL Institute, a Fellow at the Cornell Worker Institute, and a member of the Organization Development Network and the Gestalt International Study Center. Her other pursuits include martial arts, yoga, meditation, painting, and hiking.

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Bob Greene is an experienced consultant, coach, and trainer, who works with emerging and established leaders to increase insight and effectiveness; foster productive teams and a team-oriented culture; and support diversity and inclusion.

Bob has worked with clients in the nonprofit, government, and private sectors. He is also a Learning Coach Team Lead with College for America @ Southern New Hampshire University, where he is helping to launch an innovative bachelor's degree program for working adults. Bob is an online moderator with Harvard Business Publishing's Leadership Direct program.

Bob has a master's degree from Cornell University and completed the NTL Institute Diversity Leadership Certificate Program. He created the Nonprofit Leadership Institute at Montgomery College (Maryland) and has published articles and presented workshops on nonprofit issues, diversity and inclusion, and organization development.

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NOTES

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