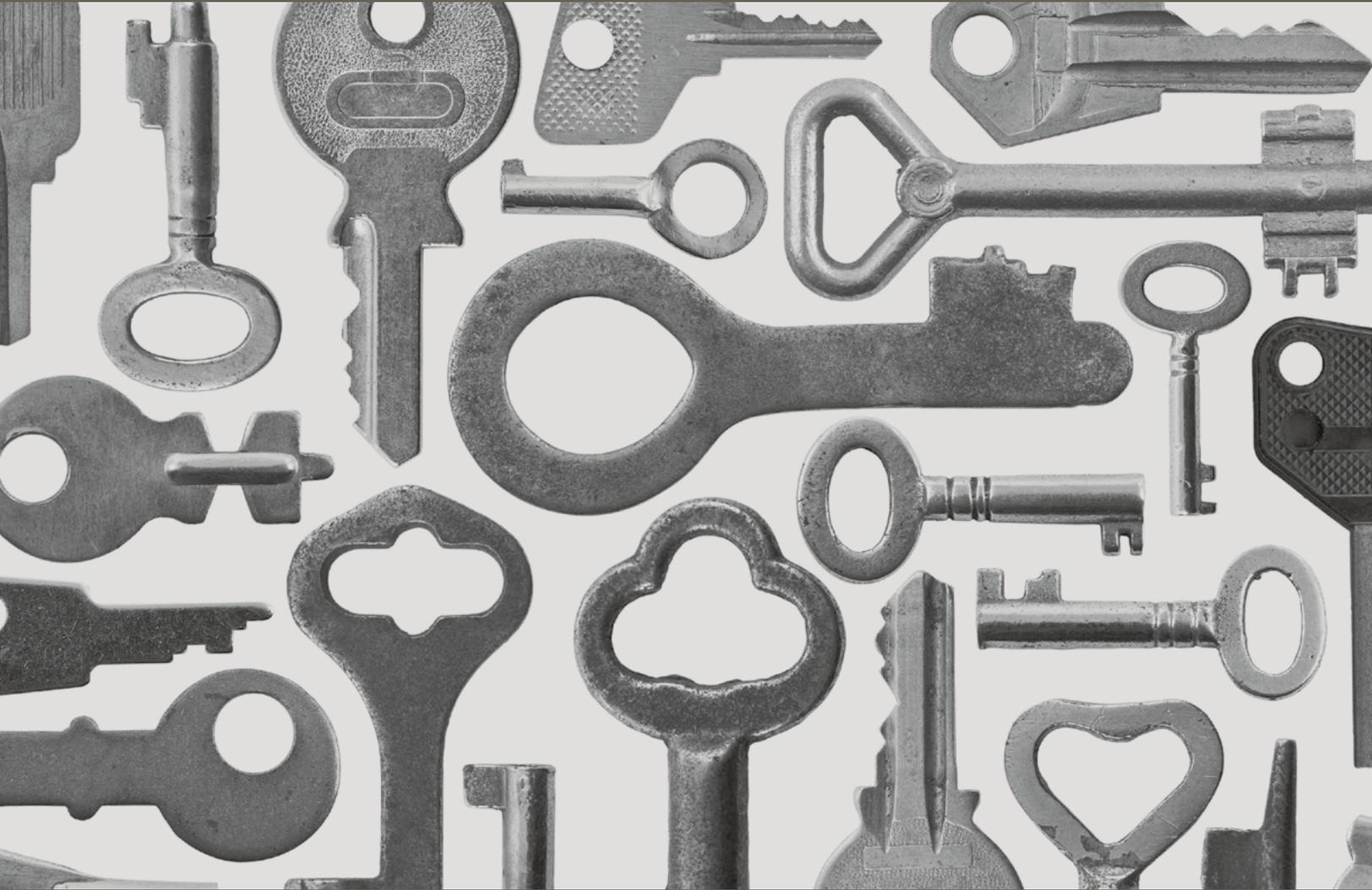


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A Perspective on Diversity

Building a Culture of Curiosity

a fierce white paper

A Perspective on Diversity

Building a Culture of Curiosity

SUMMARY

Appreciating diversity is not a new concept. [David Grayson](#), an American journalist born in 1870, said, “Commandment number one of any truly civilized society is this: let people be different.”

Nowadays, we realize accepting differences is about more than creating a civilized society. The rewards are deep. With almost 7 billion people in the world ¹, relying on the limited viewpoint of one individual is illogical. Building curiosity about different opinions leads to better decisions as well as in-depth collaboration, [effective teamwork](#) and innovation.

Culture, age, ethnicity, abilities, gender, gender identity, race, sexual orientation and religious background are among the elements that make up the whole of the individual. Yet none of these characteristics stand alone. By focusing on **diversity of thought and ideas** rather than on individual characteristics, organizations are able to organically encompass differences.

While workforces are more diverse than ever, many organizations are not leveraging the available insights. People from diverse backgrounds are actively recruited and hired, yet once they join the organization, they are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to take on the identity of the organization rather than speak out and share their views.

Tools and techniques that promote intellectual curiosity and, [candid conversations](#) enrich group identity and strengthen the relevance of organizations.

PROBLEM

When a work environment rewards *blending in* rather than encouraging employees to *speak out and investigate alternate perspectives*, organizations miss out on the benefits of a diverse workforce.

By focusing on diversity of thought and ideas rather than on individual characteristics, organizations are able to organically encompass differences.

¹ US Census Bureau

SOLUTION

No matter how richly diverse an organization, full potential is only realized through curiosity and inclusion. A culture of curiosity empowers employees to express opinions without fear of alienation or retribution. Differing opinions are not simply tolerated; they are sought out, encouraged and valued. Questions are expected. Ideas are exchanged freely, and silos break down as people solicit diverse input and learn from each other.

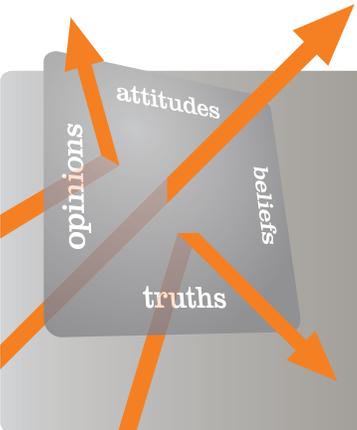
A diverse population is not the end goal; it is only the beginning. The final objectives are the achievements, innovation and improvements resulting from the insights of a diverse workforce—collective wisdom greater than the sum of its parts.

This paper investigates three critical context shifts that help build a culture of curiosity and position organizations to leverage diversity.

CONTEXT SHIFTS FROM

TO

Focusing on Individual Characteristics	→ Encouraging Diversity of Thought
Executing Tactical Approaches	→ Building Organizational Values
Instituting Overarching Policies	→ Confronting Behaviors Directly



What is Context?

“Each of us experiences life in a unique context—a filter consisting of our strongly held opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, which have been shaped and reinforced over a lifetime. Our context determines how we experience the content of our lives.”

– SUSAN SCOTT

Excerpted from the national bestseller *Fierce Conversations, Achieving Success at Work and In Life, One Conversation at a Time*

A culture of curiosity requires awareness of context at the individual and organizational levels. Individuals enter into conversations with preconceived ideas and opinions. At an organizational level, context is established through what is expected, what is valued and what is rewarded. Building self and organizational awareness allows people to recognize context and expand thought by looking at situations more broadly.

When diversity and inclusion are fostered rather than engineered, diverse perspectives from all people are naturally represented.

Context Shift #1

Focusing on Individual Characteristics → Encouraging Diversity of Thought

The metaphorical phrase “you can’t judge a book by its cover” has endured as long as it has for a reason. It speaks truth and resonates with people. In a similar vein, an employee should not be judged by the generation they represent, the religion they practice or the socioeconomic status they were raised in. Because the combination of experiences and characteristics are so vast, it is fruitless to attempt to do so.

What organizations can do is ensure employees become skilled at gathering insights from people of all backgrounds and encourage employees to interrogate their own perceptions of reality. Focus then shifts to the ideas, thoughts and thought processes of the individual.

One of the transformational ideas at [Fierce, Inc.](#) is that “**all conversations are with myself and sometimes they involve other people.**” In other words, everyone enters into conversations with their own opinions, beliefs and attitudes.

“Personal context is often so deeply engrained, people don’t realize it’s not only influencing their reaction to information, but also their ability to receive information in the first place,” said Halley Bock, CEO at [Fierce](#). “People will often use conversations as a forum to validate, confirm and reinforce their own previously held beliefs.”

Get Curious

Building a work environment where diversity of thought is valued begins with the commitment to enter into conversations without making assumptions, to interrogate personal context. The goal is to learn rather than to convince. If participants spend an entire meeting convincing others of what they know, nobody learns anything new.

Curiosity not only brings fresh ideas to light, it also increases the likelihood of well-

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“If the overall belief is that you will gain approval or promotions by exchanging your identity for your organization’s identity, you’re not encouraged to expand thinking.”

Kim Bohr, Fierce, Inc.

rounded decisions. Without curiosity and inquisitiveness, meetings become mere presentations; perspectives are not shared and acumen is not improved.

Expand Thinking

Organizations understand the benefits of a workforce that represents its consumers and clients. When employee diversity mirrors the customer base, organizations have a better understanding of the clients they serve. However, if the work environment rewards apathetic agreement, thereby discouraging the very differences it sought to engage, the benefits of a diverse workforce are wasted and the organization is put at risk of falling into the trap of group think.

Diversity in and of itself is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is the creativity, innovation and insight that result from open and inclusive dialogue.

“If the overall belief is that you will gain approval or promotions by exchanging your identity for your organization’s identity, you’re not encouraged to expand thinking,” said Kim Bohr, Senior Vice President of Client Development at Fierce. “And you lose motivation to seek out diverse ideas and opinions from colleagues.”

Interrogate Reality

Reality is elusive; multiple realities can exist simultaneously and change constantly. Leaders replace the *potential for diverse thought* with the *reality of diverse thought* by creating a work environment that encourages employees to challenge their own realities, ask questions and revisit alternate perspectives regularly.

Context shift #2

Executing Tactical Approaches → Building Organizational Values

Tactical approaches to diversity are carried out with a limited or immediate end in view. The driving force is adherence to rules, not building an environment of **effective teamwork** and innovation.

“When diversity training is lumped into the on-boarding process, diversity is devalued,” said Bock. “Diversity becomes a check box on a new employee immersion plan rather than a value-add and an expectation of the way business will be done.”

On an individual level, values are the principals through which life is lived and the context through which decisions are made. At an organizational level, value is demonstrated through what behaviors and actions are rewarded. If the mission

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Six Key Trends That Increase Employee Productivity and Engagement

statement declares diversity to be a core principle of the organization, yet people are discouraged from speaking up or spending time and energy investigating differing viewpoints, the organization is not proceeding in alignment with its declared values.

Provoke Learning

When diversity and inclusion are part of the value system rather than being driven by compliance, there is less need for tactical training. Curiosity and appreciation for diverse perspectives become a part of a company’s value system and culture. People want to expand their thinking and learn from each other. Inclusion is no longer something that is mandatory; it as a naturally engrained way to improve processes and decisions.

Context shift #3

Instituting Overarching Policies → Confronting Behaviors Directly

Most professionals have experienced policy changes that did not make sense or seemed unnecessary. The policy change was most likely a response to individual behaviors.

Policy or rule changes established due to one person’s behavior waste time and potentially alienate those who do not need to change behavior. Not only do overarching policies have negative effects on team morale, they also lead to dangerous ambiguity. Offending individuals are not directly confronted and prompted to change. As a result, behaviors are likely to continue.

Tackle Tough Challenges

Addressing attitudinal issues or discriminatory problems head-on shows respect for all employees. Progressive organizations set appreciation for diversity as an expectation and then address non-compliance quickly and clearly.

According to [Six Key Trends That Increase Employee Productivity and Engagement](#), 93% of professionals agree or strongly agree a successful company has a culture of effective confrontation. Yet 37% feel their organization has an overall culture of “terminal niceness” and avoiding confrontation.

Diversity challenges, by their very nature, are complex. People may not be comfortable being confronted and are usually even less comfortable confronting others. Conducting effective [confrontation conversations](#), especially when dealing with issues of diversity, is a learned skill.

The first step is to understand that avoiding confrontation helps nobody. The second is to build the skills necessary for employees to conduct **candid conversations** and accurately describe their reality without laying blame. Bringing individualized and focused attention to issues that need to be discussed shows respect for all parties involved and sends a clear message to those watching. Inappropriate behaviors will not be tolerated. Observers see tough problems dealt with directly and fairly, and the culture is strengthened in multiple ways.

When leaders are ambiguous and indirect, nothing changes. Naming and discussing problems truthfully provides the impetus for change and builds a safe environment for the open exchange of ideas.

Enrich Relationships

In the fast-paced world of business, time is a gift. Fresh perspectives are a gift. The way to benefit from these gifts is to stay present and inquisitive and make sure each conversation counts.

Seeking out and appreciating new ideas and diverse insights not only brings collective wisdom and improves decision-making, it also engages supporters, builds alliances and enriches personal and business connections. One conversation at a time, relationships are built and strengthened.

Conclusion

A diverse workforce is the start; however, its existence is not the final goal. Rewards and measurable results are achieved through **fierce conversations** that interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges and enrich relationships.

The power of inclusion begins when people understand the value of diverse perspectives and encourage others to express their opinions. Authentic disclosure results in increased engagement, collaboration and innovation.

Organizations create a culture of curiosity when the following context shifts take place:

FROM		TO
Focusing on Individual Characteristics	➔	Encouraging Diversity of Thought
Executing Tactical Approaches	➔	Building Organizational Values
Instituting Overarching Policies	➔	Confronting Behaviors Directly

The power of inclusion begins when people understand the value of diverse perspectives and encourage others to express their opinions.

When the focus shifts from individual characteristics to diversity of thought, organizations are able to naturally encompass differences. When organizational values are clear, modeled and engrained, tactical approaches are less necessary. And when behaviors that put the values of the organization at risk are confronted in an honest and timely manner, both the culture and the organization grow stronger.

The power of diversity is realized when work cultures promote curiosity, and diverse perspectives are embraced.

About Fierce

Fierce, Inc. is a [leadership development and training](#) company that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Traditional programs are impersonal, complicated and disconnected from concrete results. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success, and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce, Inc. is certified as a Women-Owned Business by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council and the Astra Women's Business Alliance. Please find us in Seattle and online at www.fierceinc.com.