Let's Collaborate: Challenges Facing Intercultural Diversity

Jürgen Bolten
Partner in the weReurope project, University of Jena, Germany

Let's Collaborate: Challenges Facing Intercultural Diversity

Jürgen Bolten
Partner in the WeReurope project, University of Jena, Germany

1. Handling Diversity

In the last decades alone, a number of methods for "dealing with" or even "managing" diversity have been presented and revised. To be sure, these developments parallel the evolution of the globalization processes in the last third of the last century. In a European context, for example, these processes can be divided into three phases: *first*, a homogeneous "coherence phase" of the 1970's, 1980's and early 1990's; *second*, the fragmented "differentiation phase" of the 1990's and the first years of the 21st century; and then the *third* current "cohesion phase" characterized by cohesive modular networks.

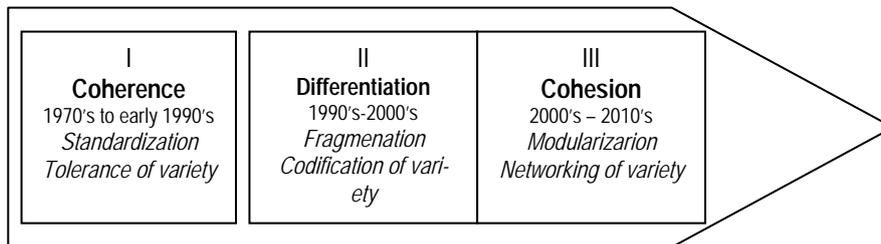| I Coherence 1970's to early 1990's *Standardization* *Tolerance of variety*	II Differentiation 1990's-2000's *Fragmenation* *Codification of variety*	III Cohesion 2000's – 2010's *Modularizarion* *Networking of variety*

Fig. 1: "Diversity" in the recent phases of the process of globalization

The establishment of parallel developments between the phases of globalization and the paradigm shifts within diversity management concepts (in a Western European context for the most part) will form the core of this text. It will conclude with an argument for a dialogic form of intercultural diversity management which itself drives a certain mode of diversity: "Be yourself, but let's collaborate." It is an active, cooperative form of diversity that encourages cohesive networking.

2. Lost in standardization

At the beginning of the last third of the 20th century, globalization was, for the most part, motivated by the effort to combine economic and political interests across national boundaries. Its purpose was essentially the projection of "uniform" potential authority beyond political borders. Examples of this phenomenon might include the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 transforming the European Community into the European Union. Another expression of coercive international political cooperation is the "global player" hype of the 1980's and early 1990's leading to globally standardized products and brands as well as internationally consistent management strategies ("McWorld," 1992; "McDonaldization," 1993). As in these cases, when the focus is on the greater phenomenon of globalization, smaller issues such as "diversity" are a lesser priority. Diversity is tolerated as long as it does not interfere with the broad internal coherence of the collective in question (e.g. the business, organization, or society). Diversity is made subordinate to the existing *Leitkulturen* and was frequently "lost in standardization."

As early as the beginning of the 1990's, it became clear that organizational strategies demanding adaptation and integration would result in the opposite of their desired goals. Even if it were to be ignored rather than controlled, diversity is a fact. It develops and becomes apparent when the superstructure of collective unity itself is recognized as too global, too abstract and too implausible. The artifice of the dominant homogeneity and coherence models of those decades was finally recognized not only through the dissolution of political blocs that had been held together by force, but also through the failure of "global" management and marketing strategies based on standardization and the rejection of differentiation.

The desire for global homogeneity was quickly replaced by an increasing desire for the acceptance and appreciation of "heterogeneity" and indeed "diversity." This, paradoxically, became possible through the fact that globalization, contrary, perhaps to the wishes of economists, did not function as a process of international standardization:

> With multidimensional globalization, it is not only a new set of connections and cross-connections between states and societies which come into being. Much more

3

> far-reaching is the breakdown of the basic assumptions whereby societies and states have been conceived, organized and experienced as territorial units separated from one another. Globality means that the unity of national state and national society comes unstuck; new relations of power and competition, conflict and intersection, take shape between, on the one hand, national states and actors, and on the other hand, transnational actors, identities, social spaces, situations and processes. (Beck 2000, p.21)

In the growing division between nation-state and nation-society, all previous paradigms and strategies based on homogeneity were called into question. The traditions of national/cultural standardization that reached back for centuries had become a certitude confirmed by individual and social assumptions of internal consistency. Suddenly, processes of communication and reciprocity became obvious across a broad range of valued and well-protected but often capricious borders. Superficially, these appeared to indicate or encourage collective standardization, but in fact they are only sustainable through the recognition of variety and difference.

3. Lost in diversity

When one attempts to revise trusted social structures, it is not only the collectives themselves – to that point assumed to be internally homogeneous – that are thrown into uncertainty. Indeed, the adoption of a new perspective reveals previously ignored inconsistencies resulting in a competition of interests. Mutual respect becomes the key to self-expression in a cacophony of diverse perspectives.

To prevent this from devolving into a situation of "every man [sic] for himself," one required the artificial norms of political correctness. This is most obvious in the institutionalized use of euphemism (e.g. "differently-abled" in favor of "handicapped" or even "disabled") and neologism (e.g. "chairperson" or "people of color") which reached its cultural zenith in the 1990's. The purpose of political correctness in a post-standardization environment was clearly the overt expression of social equality and the explicit respect of others' values.

Diversity management, such as, for example, the Fairness and Discrimination Approach (cf. Thomas & Ely, 1996) can, however, run the risk of diminishing the opportunities for explicit discussions regarding difference and diversity due to its emphasis on objectivity and the equal validity of all perspectives. The result

then became a communicative context characterized by fragmentation in which various interests existed parallel to one another.

The Access and Legitimacy Approach (cf. Aretz & Hansen, 2002) on the other hand, while admittedly driven by economic rather than ethical interests, offers a similar perspective. Unlike the Fairness and Discrimination Approach, however, Access and Legitimacy institutes and functionalizes diversity structures within the organization.

This is accomplished through conscious adaptation to the target market in the selection of employees according to desired characteristics (e.g. age, religious affiliation, nationality, native language etc.) corresponding to potential consumer demands. The fragmentation and isolation within the company can, in this way, never be truly overcome.

Although both of these diversity management approaches were formulated in good faith, intending to promote the rights and equality of the individual members of the collective, they enforced, rather, parallel systems that progress in relative isolation.

Somewhat earlier than in Europe, "politically correct" diversity management in the United States was gradually recognized as counterproductive. It was seen to lead not only to organizational fragmentation and disunity, but also seemed to be economically unfeasible.

The sociologist Robert Putnam, in his study entitled *Bowling Alone* (2000), revealed that in the 1980's the number of single bowlers had grown disproportionately relative to the number of league bowlers. Economically, Putnam showed, there were reasons to be concerned about this development, since league players, due to their longer (social) visits to the bowling alley, consumed three times as much pizza as bowlers playing individually. Putnam, basing on his critical description of the somewhat dogmatic American approach to diversity management, offers his perspective on the "collapse of American community" and a program for its "revival" (Putnam 2000, p.3) rooted in a reestablishment of social trust. Putnam's conclusions, while certainly controversial, do show that economic conditions can correlate strongly to existing conditions of "social capital." One conclusion from Putnam that seems quite clear, however, is the fact that diversity management that is based on maxims of political cor-

rectness can lead to a collective of "lonely bowlers"; individuals "lost in diversity."

These obsolete approaches set no common goals, no common visions, and no foundation for mutual trust. In such a context, individuals can establish no sustainable reciprocal relationships, remaining instead a collection of individual ambitions with no opportunity to establish a community of the kind described by Putnam.

4. From *Multicultural* to *Intercultural* Diversity Management

While the second phase of the process of globalization has been perceived as a utopian reaction to the drive towards homogeneity and standardization of the earlier phase, it can now be understood as little more than an extreme overreaction with its likewise impractical conclusions (e.g. political correctness and diversity fetishism). The resulting fragmentation was likely counterproductive but certainly led to the third phase of diversity management seeking to constructively employ the weaknesses of previous efforts. One of the first efforts to explore the flawed previous systems was undertaken by Roland Robertson who then coined the term *glocalization* (Featherstone & Robertson, 1995, p.25ff.). In this work, the author claims that the respective centrifugal and centripetal forces that characterized the previous approaches to globalization must be understood as interrelated features of a *single* process. The assumed "either <…> or" of homogenization and differentiation appear is being replaced through the appearance of differentiated solutions built on an inclusive logic.

This sort of *fuzzy logic* appears in many of the newer approaches to diversity management, especially since the turn of the 21st century. The Learning and Effectiveness Approach, for example, not only integrates the ethical and economic orientation of the differentiation phase, but also productively encourages diversity as an opportunity to learn from one another. Fragmentation is modularized and corporate cultures are encouraged in which "each employee brings his or her individual personality, social and cultural background to the organization" (Aretz & Hansen, 2002, p. 17, *translation by author*).

Diversity management that is constructed in such a way is no longer primarily a form of *structural management* seeking to institutionalize its diversity and gua-

guaranteeing equality. Instead, it becomes a form of *process management* in which the central goal becomes the confluence of all of the equally-valid characteristics, experiences, knowledge, values, perspectives and convictions that will exist in parallel within the collective. This type of diversity management must recognize that real value arises in cooperation and the preservation of difference that are far superior to the actions of individuals operating in parallel isolation.

One example that can well illustrate the operation of organizational processes comes from the field of marketing. By the year 2000, marketing experts were forced to recognize that the increasing diversification of products - especially consumer goods – had become counterproductive. The evolution of flavors and scents (e.g. in deodorants, cigarettes, or soft drinks) had led consumers to lose their orientation among the variety. The result was a *decrease* in consumption rather than an *increase*. Only after the introduction of modularized (and "networked") categories through the introduction of "product families" did consumer demands again correspond to producer expectations.

Unlike in homogenization processes, this form of modularization is not based upon internal coherence, but instead upon cohesion. Coherence seeks uniformity based on the subordination of variety to desired standards. Cohesion seeks consistency through the voluntary interaction of difference in coexistence. The social networking and Web 2.0 phenomena of recent years likewise operate on and illustrate these models of cohesion.

Cohesion can furthermore be illustrated through analogous properties drawn from the study of physics. The term "cohesion" is, in chemistry and physics, often used in the context of surface tension (between water molecules, for example). This analogy is particularly apt as a description of the third phase of globalization and diversity management. Surface tension, for example, creates something that is observably shared – in this case the smooth surface of the water. Individual molecules are not completely subsumed or lost in the collection, but at the same time the connection between the molecules is not permanent, ending when they are disturbed by a stone thrown into the water. The molecules separate as complete molecules and "seek" new connections. If we bring our physics analogy back to the realm of social interaction, the "search" for new cohesion represents the potential for the establishment of new network connections. In these connections – unlike among water molecules, the

individual retains a degree of control in his involvement in the network. The individual can assess the advantages of potential connections and considers this in his "search" (as a member of the online network Facebook will accept or reject offers of friendship).

The risk of failure in reciprocal relationships is, of course, somewhat higher under conditions of cohesion than they might have been under a regime of coherence. Cohesion implies multiple options and is furthermore based upon processual and voluntary action. For this reason they may lack the permanence that can characterize relationships (either voluntary or otherwise) rooted in standards of coherence.

The difference between diversity management based on coherence and one based on cohesion becomes abundantly clear when one examines the corporate guidelines from the late 1990's with those from ten years later. The corporate goals of Hewlett Packard from 1999 read, for example:

"In recognizing the personal achievements and self-respect, this company values the individuality of every employee…HP places great value hiring and advancing employees regardless of skin color, nationality, culture, age, gender, or disability. In this respect we are dedicated to a high level of equality and opportunity for all of our employees." (*translation by author*)

By 2009, the guidelines had been reformulated corresponding to a cohesive interaction between employees. Structural multiculturalism had become processual interculturalism:

"HP values diversity in its employee structure and encourages the cooperative work of people from all backgrounds regardless of their nationality, age, or individual abilities. Diversity promotes creativity." (*translation by author*)

Cohesive networking as described above does not arise spontaneously. On the other hand it is not something that can be actively directed because it depends on the compatibility of a variety of interests, talents, and competences that the individuals contribute to the collective (recall the model of surface tension). The diversity must be recognized and brought into contact through processes of intercultural negotiation. The term intercultural diversity *management*, therefore, is no longer appropriate. The process itself is one rooted in emergence and will possess its own dynamic form that cannot be "managed" in the sense

of directing the process consciously. A more fitting description might be "diversity coaching" or even "diversity mediation."

5. Perspectives

How much potential exists and how the individuals in the organization will connect to one another in a diversity scenario is impossible to predict. Such scenarios are always challenges based on (largely unpredictable) synergetic processes. To return to the water metaphor, one can observe the chaos in a pot of boiling water: here it is likewise impossible to say in advance which water molecules will enter into the multiple convection streams at the heat increases. The intensity and the direction of the rolling boil can likewise not be reasonably subjected to external control. From outside, one can only guarantee that conditions are right to create the rolling boil itself.

The same can be said of intercultural diversity processes within organizations. Measures can certainly be taken to ensure that the potential for network creation exists. This may include the removal of communicational barriers in the workplace which alone can provide a situation in which individuals may offer their expertise in certain social, educational or experiential contexts. Simply having a channel to express her knowledge with others can enable the establishment of reciprocal network connections.

As illustrated by the large number of interesting topics and opportunities in recent efforts to apply the principles of Web 2.0 computing that have failed due to lack of participation, technical requirements are not enough by themselves (e.g. the recent failure of Google Wave). Self-organizing systems must be primed with some form of cohesive dynamic in order for them to become and remain sustainable.

What is essential at the intersection between organizational and personnel development is the encouragement of collaboration through the inclusion of appropriate external encouragement. In the terminology of social network analysis, these external impulses are known as "promoters" (cf. Bäuerle, 2010). They initiate the emergent processes by acting, for example, as interfaces in the reciprocity that develops between the individual nodes of the network. The promoters may establish the connections, activate them, or intensify them, but their primary function is to act as the communicative catalyst with the active

network nodes representing a fulcrum between the micro and macro levels of the organization. Promoters encourage learning processes, the exchange of knowledge, and open the channels of communication, interaction, and collaboration while simultaneously building a foundation of trust. They help to recognize potential compatibilities within the active network and seek interfaces with networks outside of their own. In this way, promoters encourage the development of the cohesion potential among the members of the collective while at the same time they strengthen the organizational network as a "macroculture." In their function as a "moderator," then, promoters undertake a formative role in the emergent processes.

They represent, therefore, essential components in the successful establishment of 'emergent systemic competence' within organizations and furthermore promote an internal intercultural diversity competence.

The identification of these promoters, then, becomes the task of personnel development, and it goes without saying that social competence and trustworthiness should also be the characteristics of the motivators and catalysts of network emergence. In both interaction and collaboration, it is essential that incentive systems are put into place creating and encouraging, for example, viable processual opportunities. This has always existed as an important question in the development of internal organization, but in the more specific context of *diversity* processes, the goal will be the establishment of cohesive cooperation requiring a complex interplay of organizational and personnel development (Bolten 2010).

Bibliography

Aretz, H.-J./ Hansen, K. (2002): Diversity und Diversity-Management im Unternehmen. Eine Analyse aus systemtheoretischer Sicht. Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT-Verlag.

Beck, Ulrich (2000): What is Globalization? Oxford: Blackwell.

Bäuerle, Irina I. (2010): Integriertes Konzept des Informations-, Kommunikations- und Wissensmanagement als neue Perspektive für die (interkulturelle) Organisationsentwicklung. In: C.Barmeyer/ J.Bolten (Hg.), Interkulturelle Personal- und Organisationsentwicklung. Sternenfels, 115-126: Wissenschaft und Praxis.

Bolten, Jürgen (2010): Können Organisationen interkulturelle Kompetenz ausbilden? Zum Zusammenspiel von interkultureller Organisations- und Personalentwicklung und interkulturellem Wissensmanagement. In: C.Barmeyer/ J.Bolten (Hg.): Interkulturelle Personal- und Organisationsentwicklung. Sternenfels: Wissenschaft und Praxis, 91-114.

Featherstone, Mike/Lash, Scott/Robertson, Roland (1995) (Hg.): Global Modernities. London/Newbury, Park/New Delhi: Sage Publications

Putnam, Robert D. (2000): Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American Community. New York u.a.: Simon & Schuster.

Thomas, D. A./Ely, R. J. 1996: Making differences matter: A new paradigm for managing diversity. In: Harvard Business Review, H. 5, 79-91.