Simmering caldera

Why do we value bio-diversity and yet look upon social diversity as an “issue”? This is a conundrum, for sure. There are many varied views on socially ascribed diversity; its “issues” are critically debated, passionately held, and politically created. This simmering caldera erupts periodically into movements for human rights and social justice. As a response to these movements, public, civil and private sectors in many countries around the world have been encouraged, either by populist pressure, customer demand, citizen action or public policy directives, to address the issues of diversity in their respective milieus.

Historical context: the aristocracy of the dominant view

Diversity issues are not new. They are instead historically situated. It falls on each generation to debate and wrestle with solutions to promote, or erode, the rights of populist expression – including dissent – as well as the rights of societal and political inclusion. The philosopher John Stuart Mills (1859: 417), for example, wrote about the injustices of his day suggesting that the aristocracy of colour and sex had no place in government:

For with what truth or rationality could the suffrage be termed universal. . . . To declare that a voice in the government is the right of all, and demand it only for a part – the part, namely, to which the claimant himself belongs – is to renounce even the appearance of principle.

Three observations are worth noting within a situated historical context. First, such struggles to obtain equal participation in civil society, government and the workplace require courage, fortitude and real leadership. They also build upon the experiences of past generations; it means that sharing experiences becomes important. In this book, several articles chronicle recent struggles to obtain equality in society and the workplace. For example, James Joseph in
Managing Diversity: The United States Experience, addresses his own career experiences, as a “rarity” in the organizational contexts in which he found himself at the time – an African-American man in very senior positions, in government, civil society and in business, who led efforts to embed the principles of inclusion in the workplace.

The second observation is that, as a new moral consciousness dawns on people everywhere, backlash and retrenchment are also woven into the fabric of many societies, as guardians of the dominant view grapple with transformation of their worlds. Vigilance and responsible action are needed to set the alarm bells ringing. We have included an article by Jennifer Kam and Joanna Eidsmore, Applying Burlesque Rhetoric to Create Social Change, which addresses the inappropriate use of racial slurs to sell their t-shirts by the retailer Abercrombie and Fitch (A&F). When looking at the websites cited by these authors, the range of reactions are mixed – ranging from “what’s the big deal, you’re over reacting” to “outrageous . . . how can A&F expect to make money off of racial jokes about Chinese people?”

The third observation addresses the transformation of workplace environments themselves. Where compliance to workplace equity has been mandated by legislative fiat, businesses as well as public sector institutions resort to “coverage of the law” as a form of training. What history shows is that diversity is not a one-time event, but an ongoing practice. Mario Ghiggino in, Diversity: Ideas to Create Value in the Workplace, illustrates some of the practices to instil respect in culturally diverse, multi-national environments.

The future: from managing to leading diversity

During the last 45 years, notions of equal opportunity for those disadvantaged due to race, gender, disabilities, and life style preferences have evolved from compliance to what is currently referred to as managing diversity. Thomas and Ely (1996) walks us through this recent history in terms of three paradigms – discrimination and fairness, access and legitimacy, as well as learning and effectiveness. They suggest that the discrimination and fairness paradigm was based on the notion of “sameness” in which organizational environments should operate as if everyone was the same, irrespective of gender, race or nationality. There was no room for diversity. Organizations then woke up to the notions that not only were demographics changing, but so were their customers or constituencies. The access and legitimacy paradigm recognized these changing profiles as a competitive advantage, i.e., that niche markets needed niche employees to represent these organizations in their respective communities. Thomas and Ely (1996), through their work with clients, further found an emerging paradigm of valuing diversity under a model of learning and effectiveness. Diverse employees were recognized not only for their experiences as niche market advocates, but also for providing a pool of new ideas and ways of doing things that could spark a creative