The Inclusion Paradox

The Obama Era and the Transformation of Global Diversity
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THIS THING IS GLOBAL! THIS THING IS GLOBAL!
The Obama Era marks the globalization of most dimensions of our lives. Customer support for our cell phone can just as likely come from Gurgaon, Manila, or Albuquerque. The diagnosis of our chest X-rays can come from a radiologist in Bangalore or in Tacoma. Even our local city council news can come in the form of virtual reports from Filipinos watching council proceedings in Buena Vista, California. Americans are simultaneously managing virtual teams of workers in Buenos Aires, Brussels, Beijing, and Mumbai. Indian leaders, without having to repatriate, are directing American teams.

Diversity and inclusion must take into account these labor realities. While it’s important to address diversity issues within a country, we must also address them across countries. Global teams may make sense in terms of overall compensation costs, 24/7 coverage, and local language support, but we mustn’t forget they are complex organisms where inclusion/exclusion issues materialize in ways that affect both the quality of relationships and the work performed by these teams.

As U.S.-based multinationals begin planting the diversity flag in their operations outside the United States, they run the risk of inadvertently — and somewhat ironically — dismissing alternative national interpretations of diversity.
While there’s good reason to celebrate the global diversity push by American multinationals, many of which have strong diversity track records in the United States, there are pitfalls that could undermine the successful globalization of diversity and inclusion, if left unchecked.

During the past few years, I’ve given a number of presentations on diversity issues and trends to nearly 100 multinational client contacts in my native Latin America. Speaking in Buenos Aires, Santiago, São Paolo, Mexico City, and San Juan, I’ve heard these issues play out in a variety of ways. “This diversity thing is an American thing,” is a common complaint in Latin America and Europe. “We don’t see how the race issues in the United States are relevant to us — and yet we are being held accountable for targets for racial diversity that are not relevant for our workforce demographics.”

A breakdown has occurred somewhere between the inspiring workforce and people strategies and the execution of diversity as a business imperative. As a result, we’re beginning to see an increasingly resentful backlash against the American version of diversity abroad. In addition, there’s an ironic blind spot has emerged. While American companies are aggressively pushing diversity messages, many are failing to make the connection between the message of inclusion and long-standing complaints that HR policies, communication campaigns, and common business processes are culturally insensitive to Latin American or other foreign realities.

**Four Approaches to Global Diversity**

In examining both the successful and unsuccessful approaches to global diversity, it’s helpful to break them into four distinct archetypes: Isolationists, Idealists, Imperialists, and Globalists.

While members of all four archetypes are highly committed to the ideals of diversity, the differences lie in how they approach it.
Isolationists and Idealists

Isolationists tend to have a limited view of the world and tend not to think very much about diversity outside the 50 states. To them, diversity is exclusively defined in the common U.S. terms of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability, with a nod to secondary diversity issues such as thinking styles. These organizations may also take a more compliance-driven approach to diversity.

Idealists acknowledge that diversity issues must be addressed abroad but have a naïve understanding of how that could and should play out. Idealists, both sentimental and not, tend to believe that programs that have proven successful in the United States will be equally effective when implemented abroad. Neither the Isolationists nor the Idealists have much power in the global diversity arena, though some may have power within the context of the United States. Whether they have true power or not, their limited exposure to life outside the United States undermines their ability to have a significant impact on diversity on a global level.

Imperialists and Globalists

Imperialists and Globalists are the most interesting and powerful of the diversity groups. Members of both groups are highly experienced and committed to global diversity, yet they differ in their diversity missions.

The Imperialists have earned their stripes through deeply committed work in forging cutting-edge diversity strategies built around thoughtful metrics, tough accountability, minority and women leadership, and succession planning. They have been so successful in the United States that they’re now setting their sights abroad, where they seek to bring to bear all they’ve accomplished stateside.

Many members of this group are “inadvertent” Imperialists in that they would never describe themselves as such. While they may espouse values of inclusion, their actions belie a more Imperialist nature. For example, some demand that their Latin American offices develop metrics of representation and plans for how they’re going to bridge the diversity gaps in their offices. In doing so, they often describe the diversity requirements in terms of African-American, Latino, and Asian representation.

With the exception of Brazil, Latin America does not have the same degree of racial diversity as the United States, making these demands impossible to meet. In Latin regions, issues of diversity tend to be based more on class than race.
During Colonial times, people of color could purchase certificates of whiteness. While this practice certainly acknowledged race as a factor, it placed greater emphasis on an individual’s economic status in terms of privilege.

The pitfall in Imperialistic diversity lies not only in reactions to specific diversity messages, but also in corporate behaviors, including HR business and HR policies, procedures, and guidelines that Latin Americans may view as culturally insensitive. Ironically, many companies with an Imperialistic bent fail to see the contradiction between their emphasis on diversity and their cultural insensitivity in the deployment of other corporate initiatives.

Though both Imperialists and Idealists believe the U.S. approach to diversity is better, Idealists take a more social justice approach, rather than a pragmatic business approach. This results in less of an impact on the organization. In some ways, Globalists and Imperialists are cut from the same cloth. Both grasp the strategic importance of diversity to their businesses. They differ, however, in their level of focus on measurement and accountability and in their cultural sensitivities. Globalists do not assume what has worked in the United States will work elsewhere. Their first inclination is to deconstruct diversity — to unearth its true meaning in each country or region — rather than relying exclusively on the American definition.

With this approach, Globalists have been able to surface not only the cross-cultural issues between Latin American offices and their U.S. counterparts, but also the issues existing among Latin American countries themselves. As U.S. multinationals regionalize corporate work in Latin America, cultural differences are surfacing between professionals in Argentina and Mexico. Latin American business and HR leaders have been caught off guard, having assumed the barrier would be low due to a common language, similar histories of being colonized by the Spanish, and cathedrals at the hearts of their cities.

“We were wrong,” one Mexican business leader told me. “We are discovering in a painful way that there are very big differences between how business is conducted in Mexico and South America.”

Despite trying to be sensitive to the spirit of diversity, companies often make unintentional missteps. A corporate video produced in the United States and intended for a Puerto Rican audience featured a moving interview with an employee who had gone through great sacrifice crossing the Rio Grande to seek a new life in America. He talked emotionally about his dream of one day becoming a U.S. citizen. For Puerto Ricans, who are already U.S. citizens and do not see
themselves as having to aspire to illegal immigration, this was a serious insult. Several people walked out of the screening. A Globalist approach would probably avoid the assumption that what works for Latinos in the United States, where they are the minority, will also work for Latinos in Puerto Rico, where they are the majority.

The Way Forward

Diversity and inclusion offer a new platform for conversation and understanding among all involved. Diversity practitioners are strategically positioned to help broker new ways of talking about crosscultural issues that have long vexed multinationals conducting work outside the United States. However, those diversity professionals who have not had much exposure to life and work outside the United States are going to be at a significant disadvantage in stepping into this breach. Thus, chief diversity officers aspiring to lead diversity globally must make this developmental task a priority.

Setting a Globalist tone, rather than an inadvertently Imperialist one, can happen quickly in initial conversations on diversity. A variety of declarations have proven effective at disarming predisposed defensiveness against the perceived U.S. diversity Imperialist message. They include: “The key is for you to define what diversity means to you, your region, your country, your group” or “Our starting point will not be what diversity means in the United States,” or “Diversity can open up new avenues for conversation on crosscultural conflicts between Latin Americans and U.S. Americans.”

This does not negate the fact that every organization, regardless of its location, experiences some degree of resistance to change. There is a very real element of individuals and organizations digging in their heels and using the accusation of Imperialism as an excuse to avoid having the tough conversations and making the tough choices. Yet, no matter how uncomfortable, it’s something we must do if organizations and workers are to thrive in the emerging environment and if we are to continue building on the gains made so far.

Globalist Views

While U.S.-based diversity practitioners wrestle with what it means to make their strategies global — versus exporting an “American thing” — non-American, non-European multinationals are confronting diversity challenges of their own. Much
like the Americans and Europeans who preceded them during the first modern multinational expansion in the ’60s, they did not consider diversity issues mapping out ambitious global product launches and marketing strategies from their home countries. Yet here they are, running right smack into them.

It’s not just cross-country, global diversity issues that are popping up either. As the demographic tsunami ripples throughout various countries around the world, hidden issues are beginning to surface. National inclusion realities are percolating at a local level in parts of the world where diversity talk had been dismissed.

In just four years’ time — the time it takes to go to college and get a professional degree — a woman in India or China could find herself in a completely different place in terms of personal and economic power. As multinationals hire women in large numbers, a profound social change around gender roles is taking place. Income earned in her name and deposited in her bank account means greater individual power. This, in turn, lets her be more independent about the choices she makes, where she lives, and even whom she chooses to marry or when she chooses to marry, if at all.

The impact is not just societal. Glass-ceiling issues are increasingly sprouting up in these emerging economies as women succeed and expect to move up. In Latin America, for example, half of the workforce is comprised of women. Now that they’ve been in the workforce for one-and-a-half generations, Latino women are starting to bump up against the glass ceiling. Just 5 percent of listed board directorships are held by women, and 64 percent of the top 100 Latin American countries have no women in upper management. Latino women can’t help but wonder why.1

As the world continues to shrink, a male bias in these traditionally male-dominated societies poses a real challenge for organizations. Without a change in their mindset, companies that fail to embrace women in the workforce — particularly in upper management positions — are going to fall behind those that do. “I see gender mismanagement as a global geographic liability. Women offer an extraordinary opportunity for access to talent,” says Ted Childs, former chief diversity officer at IBM who now runs his own consultancy, Ted Childs® LLC. “And these male-dominated cultures or male-dominated companies, in both cases, are going to find that this attitude is a liability.”

In Canada, a country rightfully proud of its tolerant and welcoming culture, the diversity conversation is catching Canadians off-guard as they begin to glimpse a fundamental gap between their inclusion ideals and their inclusion
results. Here, the metaphor of the multicultural mosaic — where people retain their sense of group identity, yet together construct a beautiful social array — was intended to contrast with the American ideal of the proverbial melting pot in which immigrants were expected to shed their accents, dress, and customs and conform to Main Street ways. But Canadians are facing the stark reality that the mosaic is not displayed as expected in the managerial and more senior ranks. Fewer than 17 percent of corporate officers are women, even though women represent nearly half of the Canadian workforce.2 Meanwhile, only 3 percent of Canada’s visible minorities hold senior management positions, despite representing 13 percent of the Canadian labor force.3

Sourcing Talent From Long-Excluded Groups in Canada

Canada’s one-million-strong Aboriginal population comprises 3.3 percent of the population and 2.6 percent of the labor force. Yet, Aboriginals are underpaid compared to their white counterparts and face significantly higher levels of unemployment compared to the national average.4 The percentage of complaints citing disability as grounds for discrimination grew from 44 percent in 2002 to 50 percent in 2005, according to the Canadian Human Rights Commission. At the same time, the number of Canadians with disabilities is expected to grow from around 4 million today to roughly 6 million by 2026.5

Headquartered in Regina, Conexus is an integrated financial services provider with more than 70 locations throughout Saskatchewan. After years of watching its workers lured away to work in the Alberta oil sands, Conexus decided to tap into a ready source of talent right in its own backyard: the Aboriginal population at a nearby community.6 Gayle Johnson, executive vice president of human resources, marketing, and community development, admits the program required some trial and error before it ran smoothly. However, she attributes its ultimate success to these key initiatives:7

1. Before the recruitment process began, HR representatives from Conexus met with senior tribe members to explain the initiative. Only after garnering their endorsement did Conexus representatives begin meeting with community members.
2. Conexus introduced education and awareness training for its staff two years in advance of the effort, to help them understand and respect Aboriginal culture. More intensive training was provided to managers immediately before the arrival of the first group of Aboriginal employees.
3. To ensure companionship and support during the onboarding period, Aboriginal employees were hired in groups of ten.

4. Conexus brought in tribe elders to assist with communication during the ten-week training program it provides its Aboriginal employees. The program covered more than banking; it also provided social skills and personal financial training, like budgeting and how to use a checking account.

5. A First Nations liaison was hired to act as a “cultural intermediary” and advise on how to resolve issues. Since Aboriginal employees have a more relaxed attitude toward time, this made Conexus’ standard 8 a.m. start time a challenge, for example. To avoid what was sure to be tardy showings for the group during their onboarding process, Conexus moved their starting time to 9 a.m.\(^8\)

Thanks to the initiative, Aboriginals not only make up a significant portion of the Conexus workforce, they now hold financial services and administrative positions as well. Moreover, Conexus has a workforce that more closely mirrors the community — and a new customer base, to boot!

Even Europeans, who have been outspoken in questioning the relevance of diversity for them, feel the buffeting winds of an aging workforce, declining population, gender pay gap, and rising diversity through immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The ideals of German meritocracy, British common sense, and French *liberté, égalité*, and *fraternité* face uncomfortable challenges to their credibility.

**The Mix and Making it Work — Localizing Diversity and Inclusion**

Talking about *global diversity* first requires shifting from a “United States-to-the-worldview” to a “world-to-the-worldview.” In today’s upside-down world, diversity is flowing every which way.

“Diversity” and “inclusion” mean different things to different people. Some reject the word itself as reflecting American corporate imperialism that has nothing to do with non-U.S. realities. In her extensive travels across the globe, Monica Francois Marcel, a deeply experienced interculturalist and co-founder of the consultancy Language and Culture Worldwide, sees signs that organizations
are grappling with the varied aspects of inclusion. “Everyone is going to struggle with diversity within their own workforce,” she explains. She goes on to explain that while other countries, regions and companies will have to face diversity and inclusion as they define those terms, “it would be ideal if they could glean from the United States’ lessons learned without feeling as though the United States is pushing lessons on them — in other words, if they can take what they will from the experiences of the United States, improving upon them in their own regions and contexts.”

Regardless of whether I’m speaking in Latin America, Europe, Canada, India, or the United States, I frequently ask audiences if they are willing to set aside their working definitions and see if they could agree to the definition of the two terms I introduced at the beginning of this book: Diversity is the mix, inclusion is making the mix work.

With this approach, each location can define the mix and how it’s working. Three concentric circles typically appear: things that pretty much everyone brings up, like gender; topics that outliers in the group may bring up, like race in Brazil and sexual orientation in Spain; and taboo issues that no one brings up, like race in Peru and sexual orientation in India. Here’s a bit more of what I have encountered in a few of the countries where I have engaged in this conversation:

**India** — While race/ethnicity predominates when evaluating an individual’s background in the United States, race rarely appears on that list in India. Rather, the top considerations are likely to be religion, caste, and geographic region. Each of India’s 28 states has its unique predominant language and dialects (more than 300 in the whole country), as well as variations in cuisine, attire, and cultural focus. Understanding and dealing with such a broad spectrum of diversity presents a tremendous challenge in and of itself. The more expressive Punjabis, for example, are likely to dominate in the workplace, compared to the more taciturn folks from Uttar Pradesh. Managers from Northern Indian states have been known to say they will not hire anyone from a Southern state. Variances in corporate experience also cause discord. Those who grew up in outsourced, off-shored roles tend to clash with those who did not. The one-up dynamics of this issue are real and can be blatant.

“While inclusion presents an opportunity, as well as a tangible business case, to move past traditional barriers, it must be framed within the context and reali-
ties of the unique cultures of the country or location.” says Sodexo’s Senior Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, Dr. Rohini Anand. “For example, in India, where one of the defining issues is caste, some customers may be reluctant to eat food cooked by someone of a different caste, and this directly impacts us as a foodservice provider.”

**Brazil** — Geographic region is also a top consideration in Brazil. The traditional rivalry between *Paulistas* from São Paolo and *Cariocas* from Rio — and the way both look down on *Mineiros* who come from the more agricultural and mining interior of Minas Gerais — plays out in unproductive ways in the workplace. In a roundtable discussion with a group of employees in Uberlândia in Minas Gerais, *Mineiros* talked with feeling about how their morale is affected by what they believe are superior attitudes on the part of coworkers and customers from the big cities. The put-downs are both subtle and explicit, creating a mix that is not working well. Productivity suffers as a result.

**Japan** — In the Land of the Rising Sun — where only 10 percent of managers are women and 70 percent leave the workforce when they have children — rigid workplace gender roles and the aging of the population are placing extraordinary pressures on Japanese society. With a negligible immigrant influx resulting in one of the most racially homogenous countries in the world, Japan’s greatest source of diverse talent for managerial and senior roles will be women. But Japanese corporate culture is still a long way from creating pathways for women to rise into the leadership ranks. Fortunately, companies are beginning to recognize the problem. Recently, for example, Japanese electronics giant Sony appointed a head of diversity in Tokyo to address gender issues in its Japanese workforce.

**Falling Into the Same Traps? Multinationals From Emerging Nations**

As multinationals from emerging markets continue to spread their global reach, they increasingly will face the kinds of diversity and crosscultural challenges American and European multinationals have been facing — and often not addressing — for decades. Remember Chevy’s failed push to introduce the Nova in Latin America? Who would want a car that, in Spanish, means “doesn’t run?”
This Thing is Global!

Or Braniff’s “Fly in Leather” campaign that invited Latin Americans to “Volar en Cuero” (“Fly Naked”)?

Now the shoe is on the other foot. When Telefónica of Spain took over the state-run Brazilian telephone monopoly in 1998, it made the mistake of misspelling its own name on the logo plastered throughout the city, as well as on stationery and printed materials. They used the Spanish Telefónica instead of the Portuguese Telefônica. A public outcry forced them to get it right. Even Latin-American multinationals, “multilatinas,” are falling into the same traps as their American and European counterparts as they regionalize their corporate work in their own region. They, too, are running into below-the-waterline differences that go deeper than the Argentinean term che and the Peruvian equivalent compadre. Software development companies from India risk losing big accounts because their programmers are failing at crosscultural communications, with frequent misunderstandings about whether deadlines can truly be met.

So how can emerging-market companies strengthen their globalization by being diversity competent? These companies already are positioned to help broker new ways of discussing crosscultural issues that have long vexed multinationals. After all, they experienced firsthand what happened in their countries when the first multinationals came calling. And as Dr. Hammer says, “the ability to bridge across differences at the national, the ethnic, and other levels of difference is what is really going to determine our effectiveness in meeting global needs.”

Emerging-market multinationals bring their cultural strengths and offer new ways of seeing things that could be mutually beneficial. For example, Brazilians exporting the country’s spirit of jogo de cintura (a term from soccer-fevered Brazil describing soccer hip and waist feints used to get past an opponent) could offer just the right mind- and skill set we all need to adapt to an unpredictable, global business world mutating at a dizzying rate.

Emerging-market multinationals must take crosscultural competency seriously. It is the bedrock that will improve interpersonal communications between workers, open new ways of thinking about product design, and sharpen sales pitches. Companies are beginning to awaken to this realization. The Indian company I referred to earlier, for example, now puts its teams and those of its U.S. clients through intensive crosscultural working sessions.
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New Rules for the Changing Game

Everyone is spinning off-center in this new game. Emerging countries are facing global diversity, while Americans watch their long-cherished diversity assumptions and programs mutate and become owned by others. All players need to put their own house in order. Companies working to grow and prosper in this increasingly globally diverse world must deconstruct diversity and culture to unearth the true meaning in their own country or region rather than relying exclusively on each country’s past definitions.

What new rules can we glean from this new space?

Listen to employees in your home country and global offices with regard to how they perceive each other. Is there a shared sense of working together in coordination or are colleagues convinced their peers in other countries simply can’t get it right? Are workers blaming each other as the cause of low-quality work or slow response times, citing their “peculiar” way of getting things done? If so, your company may need to build crosscultural competence and instill some global diversity savvy.

Pay attention to your home country’s diversity issues. Companies that have addressed diversity issues in a progressive way within their own countries tend to be better positioned for anticipating and addressing those issues on a global scale. If we define “diversity” as the mix and “inclusion” as making the mix work, what is the desired mix of your workforce and customer base given, say, Brazilian demographics? Do you have a workforce that reflects the land of Ordem e Progresso (Order and Progress)? Are women in managerial and leadership positions? Do they feel they’re able to bring their full spectrum of talents to the business issues your company faces? With 50 percent of the population being Afro-Brazilian, are blacks well represented in your pipeline? If you have the mix right, how well is it working?

In Brazil, private companies with more than 100 employees are obliged to hire people with disabilities. Quotas vary between 2 percent and 5 percent of the labor pool, depending on each employer’s total number of employees. Yet companies struggle to find enough skilled people from this group to employ for the jobs they have. Out of their own initiative, progressive companies are creating programs to equip this workforce even before hiring them.
Be a student of the major demographic shifts in the markets you want to serve. In Latin America, the major demographic shifts are age-related, as a large influx of young people has entered the workforce just as an older generation prepares to leave, creating generational clashes. The Chilean postal service, a 100-year-old state institution, realized that its patronage-style, family-based tradition of offering lifelong employment was not going to provide the workforce needed to modernize operations for the digital age. It needed college graduates with specific technical skills to help reengineer its way of doing business. The postal service was unprepared for the generational and culture clash that resulted between those who claimed the company as a family entitlement because “my grandfather worked here” versus those newcomers who came in with a different, more competitive mindset.

In the United States, progressive, diverse companies have recognized the emerging marketplace flourishing right in their midst. Financial institutions, for example, are seeing their greatest growth coming from the rising Latino population that is projected to comprise nearly one-third of the United States by July 1, 2050.12 One officer at a major multinational bank told me that half of all new accounts in 2006 were opened by Latinos.

What new market needs are emerging in your country due to the demographic shifts?

Hard-wire it to HR. A growing number of Latin American employees are declaring that diversity, along with work-life balance, is a critical factor in what attracts them to an employer. According to Hewitt’s 2005 and 2006 Best Employers in Latin America study, one of the top five characteristics of a Best Employer was its commitment to diversity and work-life balance. Some 87 percent of employees at Best Employers said their “organization is committed to creating a work environment that embraces diversity and differences” versus 67 percent at those who were not deemed Best Employers.13 The path to inclusion lies in talent sourcing, recruiting, onboarding, compensation, and development processes that are fair, accessible, culturally appealing, and relevant to the various groups within your organization. Make it a priority to involve HR, as well as business leaders in your diversity efforts.

Bringing It Home

Diversity has become exponentially more complex as it has gone global. As Dr. Hammer explains, “The global leader today is somebody who is able to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior appropriately to cultural context in order to accomplish goals that are important to the organization. Now that’s a simple definition.
But it’s a very complex kind of capability.” Along the way, some American diversity practitioners, while savvy and supportive about global diversity issues, have expressed a private fear that United States diversity issues will be lost because U.S.-based race and ethnicity issues present unique challenges. If one’s diversity view is U.S.-to-the-world, that fear is legitimate: The United States will not be able to sustain its specific diversity issues on the top of the global agenda. But, in a world-to-the-world diversity view, where the United States is just one among many global regions that must address their own diversity issues, then the specific diversity issues found only in the United States remain on top of the agenda as a regional issue.

“Think global. Act local,” says a popular slogan. But in an upside-down world, we must also follow all the permutations of this wisdom:

- Think global. Act global.
- Think local. Act global.
- Think local. Act local.

These variations may not make for a nifty, pithy bumper sticker, but they make for far more effective global diversity strategies that truly will make the world more inclusive.

**SUMMARY POINTS**

- In addition to addressing diversity issues within a country, we must deal with diversity and inclusion issues across national boundaries.
- Enterprises that are committed to diversity may assume one of four distinct archetypes: Isolationists, Idealists, Imperialists, and Globalists.
- Diversity and inclusion may take on different meanings to different people around the world. One definition that rings true across industries and societies is: Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work.™ This definition enables every entity to define the mix and make the mix work for them.
- Multinational organizations from emerging markets may face diversity and crosscultural challenges similar to those which enterprises from developed markets have been addressing.
This Thing is Global!

SHAPING YOUR STRATEGY

- As you think about how your company and your competitors have been approaching global diversity, which archetypes are they exhibiting?
- If your company is an Isolationist, Idealist, or Imperialist, what actions or steps must you take to shift your diversity and inclusion approach to a Globalist perspective?
- What is the mix in the various places where your company has a major presence? How does it compare and contrast to the mix in the United States? How well is it working? Wherever you identify places where the mix is not working well, what steps can you take to surface those issues and begin addressing them?