

**Searching for GRACEFUL Leaders:
A Memorable Diversity Framework to Assist with Inclusivity**

Abstract

Increasing engagement and inclusion of employees with diverse backgrounds in the workforce has led to more interest and a corresponding need for more research in this arena. The dynamic shifts resulting from globalization, employee mobility and broader societal integration of employees requires that leaders are highly astute about making diversity a strategic imperative in the workplace due to the complexity and depth that is now commonplace with employee demographics. This paper explores the opportunities for increased diversity awareness, acceptance, cooperation and integration in the workplace based on the use of the proposed GRACEFUL framework. This concept aims to provide a diversity lens through the use of an easily-recalled acronym which may encourage employees and managers to be more considerate of some of the most common dimensions of diversity prevalent in the 21st century workplace. In addition, this work opens the door for future research and ongoing dialogue about the potential benefits of using this framework.

***This is a preliminary project with more depth and detailed research planned after receiving feedback and constructive criticism from conference attendees.*

Keywords: diversity, leadership, diversity management, mnemonics, acronyms

Background

As the workforce continues to become more diverse, the need for maintaining, organizing and honoring the uniqueness of members of this workforce has gained momentum and requires a higher degree of emphasis. The trends became noticeably more apparent in the latter part of the twentieth century and as the global population continually grows and the world gets ‘flatter’ (Friedman 2007), the diversity imperative will only gain more importance for leaders to effectively manage. In the late 80’s and early 90’s researchers began identifying that organizations must recognize the need to fully develop *all* members of the workforce and were suggesting that to remain competitive, there must be a variety of different approaches implemented to manage diversity (Jamieson and O’Meara 1991). Diversity is now more than something that should be simply managed, it should actually be leveraged in a way that provides benefit to, and within organizations.

In the current dynamic environment that exists (circa 2012), there are more rules and considerations, but there is also a need for acknowledgement of diversity dimensions which

requires them to be top of mind, easily remembered and easily applied in a manner that celebrates both similarities and differences of individuals. Increased levels of diversity require those in leadership to be prepared to manage the issues and concerns that may arise, while also setting an example for the appropriate ways that diversity should be embraced by all individuals and employees throughout the entire workplace. Diversity, when managed effectively, could provide an opportunity for employees to be enlightened through improved interpersonal relationships and a deeper appreciation of uniqueness that exists among employees. The reality is that diversity brings with it heterogeneity that needs to be nurtured, cultivated and appreciated as a means of increasing organizational effectiveness and competitiveness (Henry and Evans 2007). This paper argues that some of the most common diversity issues that are now prevalent in 21st century organizational environments are situated within *both* primary and secondary dimensions. If managers are able to approach and navigate diversity issues by having a memorable schema that encompasses the most frequently encountered aspects of diversity, they are likely to be more equipped to avoid diversity discrimination related issues, whilst encouraging a culture of inclusivity.

This paper and the proposed GRACEFUL framework that is being suggested and put forth for discourse, evolved from a larger research project where 19 managers interviewed in a qualitative study openly shared the most difficult leadership challenges they routinely face. A common and consistent theme that emerged during the study highlighted the challenge of recognizing (and remembering) the various dimensions of diversity so that they could lead in an appropriate and inclusive manner. The respondents acknowledged the *importance of addressing diversity*, but were frequently unable to identify the numerous aspects and dimensions that diversity consists of within their work environment. It is important to clarify that this research project is not refuting the work of previous researchers, but instead building on the research platform that has been established in this area. It is aiming to provide an enhanced means of

recalling the common aspects of diversity that have been discussed in previous research but not necessarily always remembered and applied by managers and employees in the workplace.

Diversity issues tend to be considered primarily in terms of two different dimensions: primary and secondary (Loden and Rosener 1991). Primary dimensions are interdependent and represent the core of the individual's identities like age, ethnicity, gender, mental and physical abilities, race, and sexual orientation. These primary dimensions cannot be changed and serve as the foundation for the person, although all dimensions and aspects must be considered as factors making up and influencing a person's identity. Secondary dimensions are less visible but more dynamic, including work style, geographic location, communication style, organizational role and/or level, income, work experience, family status, religion, native language, and education (Loden and Rosener 1991). From a leadership perspective, these dimensions of diversity are complex and pervasive in the workplace and warrant a significant amount of focus and consideration.

The Diversity and Leadership Imperative

Scholars have long focused on studying multiple aspects of leadership. Leadership is often examined from two primary perspectives: organizational and individual task leadership (Sahertian and Soetjipto 2011). According to Visagie and Linde (2010), the organizational perspective explores the opportunities a leader has to change the direction or goals of an organization; whereas the individual task perspective explores the opportunities of a leader to influence the work behavior of individual employees. Visagie and Linde (2010) conducted a comprehensive examination of these perspectives which uncovered some of the challenges that face individuals who are attempting to wade through diversity issues. This research studied 400 leadership styles in 11 separate organizations with both an inventory and a questionnaire to measure diversity management experience. One of the key findings revealed that most respondents did not believe that recruitment, hiring, or promotion practices in their company were

fair (in terms of honoring diversity), and had little trust in the managers to improve those practices. These findings are not necessarily surprising nor are they uncommon; however these types of studies further highlight the lack of attention and acknowledgement that is often being paid to issues related to diversity.

Over the years, researchers have also studied a variety of suggestions for how managers and organizations can incorporate these diversity concerns into a suitable framework. The concept of adopting a multi-level framework to manage diversity has been reinforced as a necessary pursuit (Syed and Kramar 2009). Communication patterns are also frequently studied as a central foundation for the effectiveness of diversity and management (Grimes and Richard 2003). Basic definitions about diversity and discourses surrounding diversity have played a key role in how diversity issues are actually addressed in the workplace (Zanoni and Jannsenns 2004). Indeed, it has also been shown that a leader's level of effectiveness is related to the effort spent by the leader both thinking about and acting through challenging circumstances; this directly relates to how those individuals in leadership positions are handling issues related to increased workplace diversity (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans and Harms, 2008).

Studies have also demonstrated that when managers employ teams without considering various aspects of diversity, those teams are less likely to be successful in their task management (Polzer, Crisp, Jarvenpaa, and Kim 2006). The need for continuous training and reinforcement on diversity issues has been highlighted in research as well as in the popular press; which has also affirmed the need for more research studies to be conducted in order to determine which training programs are most effective (Washington 2010). This paper explores a foundational premise that perhaps should precede the training programs that are being chosen and evaluated. The author is suggesting that at the nucleus of any intervention, program or tool is the need to have a clear awareness and understanding level of the most common diversity dimensions that are actually present in the workplace to begin with. Training programs and interventions are necessary and

worthwhile, but at the core of inclusivity is an awareness of diversity aspects which is predicated on remembering them.

Despite the increased attention that has been given to diversity research and the advancements that have been made, there are gaps in the literature, particularly when it comes to ways to best address diversity (Lumby and Morrison, 2010). Many studies fail to address multiple cultural contexts or seek an in-depth understanding of underlying beliefs and values (as shown by Jonsen, Maznevski and Schneider 2011). The need for increased diversity awareness and an exploration of the potential problems, ranging from discrimination suits, decreased retention and decreased trust in the leadership have been studied and revealed the importance of making diversity and inclusivity a strategic imperative that extends beyond a simple human resources function (Konrad 2006). Studies on the potential impacts of increased diversity inclusion have created a need for scholars to develop and study ways in which diversity can be effectively managed (Pitts and Wise 2010; Jonsen, Maznevski, and Schneider 2011). This research is attempting to enter the scholarly conversation by justifying the focus that leaders should be placing on diversity, whilst also acknowledging the importance of diversity management as a strategic imperative (O'Leary and Weathington, 2006; Herdman and McMillan-Capehart 2010). Having established this frontier, the author is suggesting that a more memorable framework that encompasses the diversity dimensions may further advance the progress that is being made in the arena of diversity management.

Clearly, much research has been dedicated to the problems of diversity in the workforce, but there has been a paucity of research aimed at developing practical and memorable tools to assist managers and organizations to address the issues that arise from complex diversity. This paper explores the potential benefit of using a schema framework through the GRACEFUL acronym to reinforce diversity awareness and provide a consistent lens for managers and people within organizations to rely on and conceptualize the myriad of backgrounds, beliefs and values

that exist within the workplace and fellow employees. Once the groundwork has been established, a more structured research agenda will be pursued.

To this end, diversity trends have shifted over the past two decades, and some of the most common areas that are in existence in organizations need to be a guiding lens at the forefront of employees and managers as they interact with fellow colleagues and peers. This preliminary study aims to create early stage discourse about this issue by proposing a memorable framework that should be shared and adopted by employees within organizations as a constant reminder of some of the key dimensions of diversity that are most prevalent in today's workplace. Although this framework is not meant to provide an exhaustive 'list' of the full spectrum of diversity, it may serve to raise the awareness levels to the extent that a culture of respect of differences may become commonplace.

The definition of diversity management employed here is developed from Thomas (1990). Thomas essentially states that diversity management is a comprehensive system for the manager to develop an organizational environment that is acceptable for all employees. Thomas outlines ten ways to manage diversity over the course of his paper: clarifying the motivation for managing diversity; clarifying the vision of what that diversity management could mean in terms of goals; expanding the focus to other aspects of diversity outside gender and race; auditing the current culture of the corporate environment; modifying the assumptions already in place about the workforce; modifying current systems (such as promotions); modifying models (such as those where leaders select replacements much like themselves); be situated in a position to help employees maneuver through problems as they arise; apply a special consideration test to examine whether each new program, process or idea will give special consideration to any one group; and finally, to continue a process through which diversity is considered on a continual basis. This comprehensive program asserted by Thomas (1990) aims to address and consider all the unique aspects of diversity. However, the author of this paper challenges whether there is a

simplistic, memorable corporate vernacular that precedes the management of diversity by reminding employees of the common issues that are actually being addressed.

Another theoretical underpinning of this research is drawn from Eagly and Chin (2010). Their work addresses some of the gaps in prior literature which has not thoroughly addressed how leaders deal with a wide array of backgrounds which include areas such as culture, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Leadership incorporates relationships at multiple levels (including dyadic, group and organization), so this opens the door of potential for the combination of relational theories and contingency theories to influence the study of diversity. In fact, Eagly and Chin (2010) call for a redefinition of leadership as more people from diverse backgrounds are now a part of the organizational context where many leadership efforts are being implemented. Building on the need for a framework that allows easy retrieval of common diversity dimensions, the GRACEFUL model provides a schema that managers will be able to employ that will provide a primer for other diversity initiatives by encouraging dialogue rather than avoiding it.

The proposed GRACEFUL Diversity Inclusion Framework

The author suggests that more healthy dialogue could be generated using the memorable acronym “GRACEFUL”. This acronym has seven different components: Gender, Religion, Age, Culture, Education, Fitness, Upbringing and Lifestyle.

G	This relates to the gender of the employee, group or manager. Gender studies have been an area of interest as one of the ongoing (and key) debate areas for diversity.
R	This relates to the religious background or lack thereof of a person, group, or entity. Religious backgrounds are another complex area of diversity with various rituals and religious practices needing to be practiced often during the working hours. This may require prayer rooms or other accommodation in some workplaces.
A	This relates to the age of the people within a workforce. Generational differences are highlighted by the fact that new generations often abide by value systems and trends that may contradict the practices of earlier generations. The age and

	generational gaps have become contentious issues in many workplaces.
C	This relates to the culture (background, beliefs, and values) of an employee, group, or manager.
E	This refers to the education of the employee including the area of expertise and possibly extending to the education level(s) of parents and how this may have shaped the values system between white collar and blue collar approaches to employment (See Lubrano 2003).
F	This relates to the physical and/or mental fitness level of the employee, group, or manager.
U	This relates to issues that may surround the background or upbringing up of a person and the relationship this has to that person's uniqueness and diversity. (eg- It is more common for underprivileged migrants to be entering the workplace)
L	This refers to any particular aspects of a person's lifestyle that may influence them; frequently related to sexuality.

While this certainly doesn't consider every aspect of diversity, the acronym captures the major areas within which managers must be prepared to address diversity. The GRACEFUL acronym may encourage further dialogue to take place which addresses some of the most prevalent primary and secondary dimensions of diversity.

The Rationale for Mnemonic Usage

A mnemonic is defined as 'a systematic procedure to enhance human memory' (Higbee 2001; Whitelaw, Abright et al. 2006; Higbee, Clawson et al. 1990), or a memory aiding strategy which "supplies meaning, integration and cues where none naturally exist" (Morris, Bransford et al. 1977, p. 39). The word mnemonic, which comes from the Greek word "mnemonikos" ("of memory"), aims to link new data with previously learned information (Willingham 2009). It assists in learning by reducing the amount of information ("cognitive load") and increasing the efficiency of memory acquisition and encoding. The cognitive load will be reduced by grouping objects into a single verbal or visual cue to be introduced into working memory (Howard 2006).

Mnemonic techniques can be categorised into two primary types: 1) imagery mnemonics and 2) verbal mnemonics, including sentence and first letter mnemonics (Bellezza 1981). Higbee (2001) suggests at least four ways in which acronyms and acrostics can help memory:

- Acronyms and acrostics make the material meaningful: they provide the learner with something meaningful to remember such as HOMES, ROY G. BIV, and Every Good Boy Does Fine.
- Acronyms chunk information so subjects do not have to remember a lot. Instead of remembering five lakes or seven colours, for example, the learner must only remember one word or one name that triggers several chunks of information.
- First letter mnemonics provide cues to help retrieve the items in memory. Therefore they change a recall task to an aided recall task. This makes the memory task easier by narrowing the memory search.
- First-letter mnemonics can provide the learner with the amount of items that are to be remembered and may trigger memory for other related items.

These functional aspects of mnemonics have received focused research by several authors (Higbee 2001; Malhotra 1991; Worthen and Hunt 2010; Bellezza 1981) in an attempt to clarify how and why mnemonics are so effective. Although this paper is not aiming to produce an exhaustive argument for the use of acronyms as an effective mnemonic tool, it does hope to position the GRACEFUL framework in a favourable position based on supportive research that has been done on the effectiveness of mnemonics to aid in information recall.

DISCUSSION

The more a manager is informed about diversity, the more prepared he or she will likely be to not only prevent issues, but address those issues effectively if they do arise. In this case, education and awareness are the best forms of preparation. Diversity management initiatives have

been successfully progressing over the past few decades, but in order for them to be internalized and long-lasting, the initiatives must be deployed at multiple levels (Syed and Kramar 2009). If the GRACEFUL framework is embraced throughout the workplace and serves as the predecessor of a meaningful and involved diversity management program, it may help to frame the mindset of people in the workplace in a manner that raises the awareness levels and opens the door for more productive, deeper and mature dialogues to take place. Managers also need to be more astute and possess increased awareness levels about the diversity of their workgroups, as the similarity or differences among the people in these workgroups will affect the general values of the group and may impact their corresponding output and effectiveness. This is where inclusivity in the workplace is likely to have a profound impact on the organizational culture and morale that exists within the organization, highlighting the need for a tool that allows managers and employees to easily recall some of the most common aspects of diversity that are likely to be existent in the workplace.

In order to continue emphasizing the importance of diversity dynamics and the awareness and pervasiveness that surrounds these issues, the author is suggesting the GRACEFUL acronym that triggers awareness levels and opens up pathways for dialogue amongst employees. This acronym may help reinforce to employees and managers the many dimensions on which people and their experiences are different. In a time of need for increased diversity awareness, this acronym highlights many of the main factors of diversity. As highlighted, this mnemonic provides a memorable schema which serves as an excellent way to recall information quickly.

The GRACEFUL acronym addresses many of the 'hot button' areas of diversity and extends the work of previous diversity frameworks by incorporating education, lifestyle and fitness as integral components of diversity that must be acknowledged in the current workplace setting. For instance, gender and age have important roles when defining the uniqueness that exists within most workplace settings. Zanoni (2010) found that older female employees were

often treated with a stigma of being "unable" or "unwilling to work" in certain settings which raises the alarms surrounding whether this is an issue associated more with gender or with age. Women now make up more than 50% of the workforce and as lifespans increase, the opportunities for enhanced leadership approaches that embrace these dynamics will be paramount for continued growth and the pursuit of productive, harmonious organizational cultures.

Previous research has also focused on how differences in ethnicity and cultural backgrounds among employees have affected issues such as performance and evaluation (Tsui and O'Reilly 1989), improved client service (McCormick and Kinloch 1986), and the impact of ethnicity and cultural makeup on overall profit margins (Hartenian and Gudmonson 2000; Sacco and Schmitt 2005). Each of the GRACEFUL areas could be further interrogated to highlight the importance, but suffice it to say that managing diversity effectively is a challenge that those individuals in leadership must be able to confront and embrace rather than avoid because it seems to challenging or delicate (Patrick 2011). This "call to arms" provides a pathway for the GRACEFUL framework to be explored and implemented. Making diversity a topic that is comfortable to discuss should increase awareness levels for all employees, thus providing an opportunity to have dialogues about issues and the consideration of topics that were previously considered "faux pas". This increased awareness may also help delineate boundaries among coworkers and increase cultural understanding about specific hot button issues.

If the GRACEFUL acronym is employed accurately and actively by those individuals occupying a position of leadership, those members of the workforce who do not make up the "majority" will be made more comfortable simply by the creation of a forum where diversity issues are discussed and appreciated. The result is that the culture becomes more inclusive as opposed to intrusive.

CONCLUSION

A successful and accepting workplace is one where individuals feel like valued members of the team and feel as if their opinions are welcomed. Leaders can play an important role in setting the stage for this acceptance by referring to a framework that encourages recall of diversity aspects and celebrates both differences and similarities. By accepting and using the GRACEFUL acronym, leaders may be able to reduce conflict, create an open forum for discussion of diversity issues, and create an inclusive workplace where employees are genuinely valued members.

This article opens the possibility for a range of future research options. Firstly, it warrants a more targeted study to be developed specifically aimed at analyzing practical applications of using this model and framework in an empirical setting. Additionally, it may spark the need for more research to be done on the importance of clearly identifying current diversity trends as well as the need to scrutinize the approaches that have been used for making key concepts memorable and commonplace in advance of management interventions. Finally, it reinforces the need for leaders to strive for inclusivity in the workplace.

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