



By Arne Gillert & Mark Turpin

Diversity
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In dialogue about diversity training

Diversity is a “hot issue”, also in the business world. Diversity is also a historical and culturally marked topic: how people talk about it and deal with it varies greatly across the world. And since diversity is so much about getting in dialogue and understanding each other, what could be a better way to write about diversity training in business than in a dialogue? We – Arne Gillert and Mark Turpin – decided to compile our conversation on diversity during some days spent together in Johannesburg, South Africa into this article. We are both working for an international consulting network called Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company. Arne is a German living in the Netherlands, who has worked in the youth field in Europe before – focussing among others on intercultural learning. Mark is a South African who lived in Britain for a big part of his life. In the past years, he was responsible for Personnel and Human Resource Development at CARE, an international development agency, in South Africa.

► **Arne:** When I am thinking of “diversity in the business context”, it should really read “business contexts”. I have found the reality around this topic in the US quite different from the work I have done in the Netherlands. And then of course there is South Africa. In all of these contexts there is a history of diversity, and there are reasons to deal with diversity, some of which are the same, and some of which are very different.

► **Mark:** What I see is that the reality of work is changing as societies move away from an old reality in which they tended to be more homogeneous in their ethnic and racial make-up, and in which there was frequently discrimination and marginalization against minority groups. In South Africa, a particular situation prevailed under apartheid, a system in which a minority oppressed the majority of the population, racial discrimination was institutionalised, and a pattern of job reservation prevailed.

In the 90s South Africa adopted the Employment Equity Act, which encourages firms employing more than 50 people to adopt plans aimed at increasing the representation of black people, women and disabled people in the workplace. So the laws require that companies increasingly move towards a workplace profile that is diverse in many ways.

Changing consumer markets around the world also mean that companies need to build an ability to respond to new consumer preferences, to market themselves in new ways and appeal to new market segments. This too encourages firms to recruit employees from different parts of society who understand these changes and can help develop corporate strategies, who can engage effectively with different customers and so on.

There is also perhaps another dimension in the world of work, which is that in the past most companies were involved in producing goods, and the most important factors of production were physical resources (often natural resources) and capital... Nowadays, in what is called the “knowledge economy”, knowledge and ideas are almost the most important resource that any company has and are what gives any organization its competitive edge. And the ideas and knowledge that an organisation can build on are drawn from the rich diversity of people employed within the company. If we employ people only from a narrow section of society, we are limiting ourselves as a company.

► **Arne:** When you say this, what I find striking is that on the surface there are many similarities of why companies start



dealing with diversity. In the first place, companies want to address what for them are new segments in the market. Often, there actually is a changed reality to a more diverse society. Sometimes, it is more that a business is now recognizing the diversity that has been there for a long time. Or they recognize the opportunity of tapping into the knowledge of a more diverse group.

Additionally, some businesses, in all kinds of places, are also working on diversity because they feel it is part of their identity; of who they want to be as responsible participants in society. Diversity as part of who you are, more than based on short-term revenue goals.

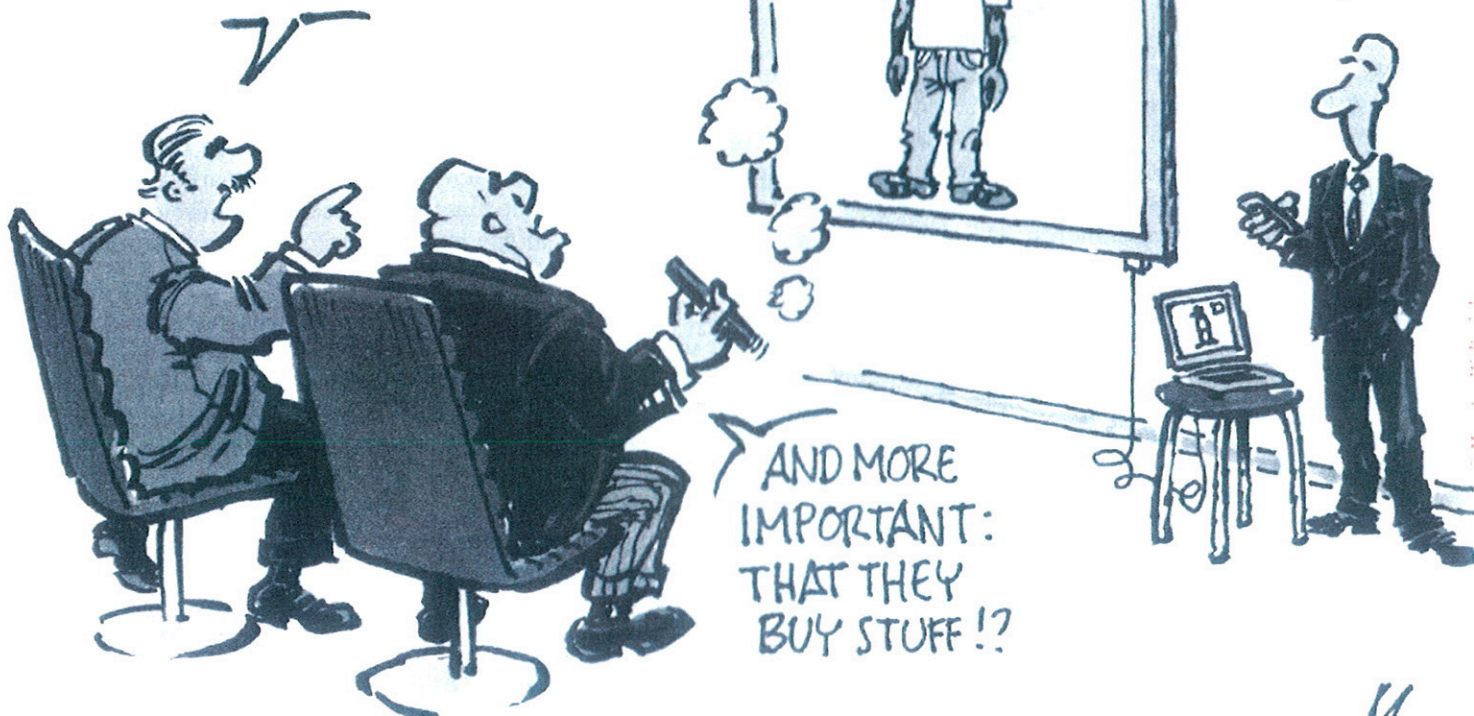
In the second place, many countries have issued laws mandating companies to deal with diversity – from simply forbidding discrimination, to setting quantitative targets for the representation of certain groups.

Next to these similarities, it would be interesting as well to look at the differences between societies. How does history change the way one can deal with diversity? – maybe the approaches to diversity will also have to be diverse, at the end of the day, with no 'one size fits all' recipe.

All of this brings to my mind the question of what is different between youth work and business, regarding diversity. One of the crucial differences is, in my opinion, hierarchy. Most of the time, businesses are organized in a way so that the considerations above – about the changing consumer markets, the identity of who you want to be as a business, or about compliance to legal requirements – are happening in the boardroom (as they are so-called strategic considerations). So when word gets out that diversity is important, for most of the employees it is something that they did not invent or ask for – it is a conclusion of management that they at best will tolerate. But they will most probably not act on it, as long as it has not become their own conclusion. It is the difference between being sent to a training, and attending it because of a need you have perceived yourself.

Most youth organizations I know are volunteer-based, and that makes a difference: nobody has the illusion that a command and order mechanism will work. Most youth workers that attend a diversity activity, I think, have actually decided that it is something they need to learn about. And this is a crucial difference. You cannot be smart against your will – so you will also not learn about diversity against your will...

NOW WAIT A MINUTE!
ARE YOU SAYING THESE
PEOPLE HAVE BEEN HERE
FOR YEARS ALREADY?



DIVERSITY TRAINING COULD WORK WITH KNOWLEDGE GAPS...

► **Mark:** I think what you are saying about youth organizations may also be true for many non-profit development agencies as well. These organizations have a “human development” focus to their work, and many of the employees may have an instinctive understanding of the value of human diversity (although the level of understanding may not always be very deep...).

What we see for sure is that diversity brings many challenges for businesses organized the way you describe. Simply having a more diverse workforce will not in itself result in a workplace culture that is more accommodating of the views, perspectives and cultural norms of a more diverse workforce. Employees from different cultures may feel that they are not truly valued by the “old” management. In South Africa, this has led to a phenomenon known as the “revolving door” syndrome, in which new black employees are recruited into management positions (partly to fulfil employment equity requirements), but do not feel valued and before long move on to the next company that is offering even better terms and conditions.

Further, different groups of employees may lack experience in working with each other, and with prevailing patterns of racism and sexism in society and in organisations, this can lead to misunderstandings, tensions and conflict between employees. Frequently these tensions manifest themselves in destructive ways, which can lead management to seek a ready-made solution in which employees are pushed through a sensitising training so that they will work more harmoniously together. And of course, more often than not, this does not really work.

► **Arne:** I am really fascinated by the idea that training as such is not what will work. There are two features of what I often see in diversity training that might cause this; concerning the very form of training, and concerning the content of many trainings. Regarding the form, traditional training removes people from the workplace to a different environment, creating the so-called “transfer-problem”. Whereas in the classroom, new ways of acting might be possible, it is so much harder to experiment with new behaviour back in the organisational setting where the culture and way of working has not changed. Regarding the content; a lot of diversity training aims at skills, behaviour, and knowledge at least in the Netherlands. (Think of communication skills or knowledge about other cultures). Trainings based on knowledge are increasingly common and are mostly based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. People then learn how other “cultures” are. I find the positive effect of these trainings that participants see that other values and ways of life exist next to their own one. And people often like the “rationality” of the model, it somehow gives them some certainty, they feel that they understand the other. On the other hand, I have found that this focus on facts also has limiting effects: participants start to take them for the truth, and stop exploring how and who the other is beyond the cultural stereotypes. It gives a false sense of security – if I only know, I will act adequately.

There is also a second reason why I believe that these trainings aimed at skills and factual knowledge often do not work. Dealing well with diversity is often more a question of how you perceive and think, not of which facts you know, or if you are able to communicate well. Most of us actually are able to communicate well, but fail to use what we are able to do when the situation gets tense.

So then we have the sensitizing trainings, aimed at influencing participants’ prejudices and perceptions, their way of thinking. Making people aware of their own backgrounds, and the relativity of norms. Of their pre-conceived ideas about others that do not hold when scrutinized. Whereas I think that this is probably the level at which we would need to work, I wonder to what extent “training” (a classroom setting with a trainer employing a variety of methods) will do the job. People will only change their ideas if they come to do just that in the first place. For those people then – ready and willing to have their perceptions and thinking challenged – a training setting in which they can experience diversity might actually work well.

► **Mark:** I would certainly agree that “diversity training” is not the solution. Many of the difficulties that may arise in a diverse workplace are as a result of underlying assumptions and beliefs that people hold, and the cultural practices that may exist in an organization, as you say. For example, in South Africa, one often finds a corporate culture in which there is a predominant language of business (usually English or Afrikaans), even though this may not be the first language of most employees. This is then the language of all corporate communication, advertising and branding.

So then some work needs to be done to demonstrate that the corporate culture values all language groups more equally: It will not be enough simply to recruit customer service personnel who are able to speak the different languages, or offer language training for those who cannot, if the corporate branding and messaging that comes from the marketing or public relations departments is still in the predominant language; as this sends subtle messages about the corporate culture to all employees and to customers of the firm.

This leads me to think that the approaches to working with diversity in the workplace do need to be very varied, as you say, and respond to the different underlying beliefs and assumptions that may exist in a company... A training solution is not the answer, because no training will by itself change the predominant culture of the organization. However, what we see often is that companies invest a lot in “diversity training”, as it seems a “quick fix”. The problem is, I have not seen that this training approach has worked in the long run, really.

So my question would then be, assuming that we have an increasingly diverse group of employees, how do we change the whole way of working in the company, in which the underlying beliefs and assumptions can be turned on their heads and in which all employees feel increasingly valued and committed to the company?

► **Arne:** I understand your point as: if you really want to make something out of diversity, it asks for a comprehensive approach, touching all aspects of the organization. Training alone won't do. The interesting thing is that this also means that the approach we need to start from is not about diversity, but it is about wider process of organizational change. An approach in which diversity is (one of the) topic(s), is in the content and gives direction to where you are going. But it does not give us the answer of how we will get where we want to go. What I make from what you say is that we should look at this process as a process of change.

Not that this makes it easy. What I see in the business world is that most change processes fail - research by Boonstra says: 70%! Especially those changes that involve changing the beliefs and attitudes of employees. Most of the time, these processes are managed like just another project in which you first define the goals (and you have to make them SMART!). So in the case of diversity, we would define the new norms, attitudes and beliefs that everyone should have, at the start of the process. Even for such an ethically inspiring idea as diversity I find this approach rather manipulative. The good news is that it does not work!

► **Mark:** It is certainly the case in South Africa that many large companies have invested substantially in diversity training initiatives, and there are many companies offering diversity training programmes, but there is little to show in the way of results; certainly no evidence that the investment in such training delivers returns for the companies concerned.

► **Arne:** What I have seen working is based on a rather strange idea. Namely, that the relationship between intentions, attitudes and beliefs on the one hand, and behaviour or action on the other hand, might not be as linear (first are the intentions and beliefs, and they determine the behaviour) as many tend to think. The strange idea is that we could view intentions and actions as connected, but in a more mutual relationship. Think, for example, that actions are first, and that the actor then makes up an intention for that action, after the fact. Or that one influences the other, in dynamic spirals of development.

The example I am thinking about was with a bank in the Netherlands. They were operating the only branch office of a bank left in a troubled neighbourhood in one of the big cities. A neighbourhood with high unemployment, poverty, crime and violence. And also a neighbourhood with a high percentage of

ethnic minorities. Because of the crime and violence in that area, their branch office was heavily protected, with muscled guards in front of the door, and thick glass between clients and the staff. So clients would only come there if they really had to. Not very surprisingly, that branch was not profitable.

One of the directors was confronted with the question if the branch office should be closed down or not. He decided not to go about this by himself, but invited openly employees from all levels to discuss about the issue. The director basically offered two options: Either we close, or we do something very different to make the branch office profitable. And if we go for something new, then whoever is here should be involved. You could say that symbolically during that meeting, the branch office was handed over to a group of employees, as if it was their own business. And their project was to do what it would take to make the branch successful.



What they did was counter-intuitive. They moved all cash-transactions to two ATMs inside and outside of the bank. And then they tore down all the barriers. The guards were sent home, the office refurbished to radiate openness and a welcoming atmosphere. They put together a team of employees working there that, as a team, spoke most of the languages of the quarter.

When they opened the refurbished office, people from the neighbourhood came in with flowers and

thanked them that they had stayed. It really had an impact. And the branch office became one of the most profitable in the region.

Curiously, that project was not aimed at "diversity". The employees that ran the project had the same kind of attitudes in the first place as most of their colleagues in the whole bank. But as they moved on to build 'their' business, dealing with diversity became a self-evident imperative. They started to organise their own learning - asking colleagues who knew the quarter for help, looking for how they could better understand their clients; read books about the topic; even asked for training. They wanted to practise how to communicate with a client with which you hardly have a common language and they wanted to understand more about values around banking and money from different cultures. Eventually, that project really changed the way of dealing with diversity.

What it did was basically create a new reality. And in that reality, dealing with diversity was not something that someone else demanded from them, but it was a logical conclusion from an aim that those employees really wanted to achieve. In that, it was a very attractive and inspiring new reality. Based on the action and ambition in that new setting, attitudes changed.

You can even draw a parallel from this example to the youth campaign, based on 'participation'. What the bank did, was nothing but participation. With the difference, that in the youth world, it is not such a revolutionary idea as it often is for business!

► **Mark:** I find this example very intriguing, because many corporate change initiatives are based on the idea that we need to start at the top, with the management team. It is certainly true that this team is often looked to as leading and modelling new behaviours and attitudes, and the premise for starting at the top is that "if those guys are not prepared to change, why should the rest of us"? Your example is taking a different perspective, which is to say let us work with a group of people in the company on a change process the motivation for which they can relate to and understand. And let them formulate, design and develop the change that is needed. The meaning of what they do will emerge when the results are seen, many of which may not or even could not have been intended or anticipated beforehand.

Those within the group, and potentially also many others from outside the group, will then be able to make meaning of the change that has taken place (without any training!) and understand the potential or wider significance for the rest of the organisation.

I could see then the potential for allowing the emergence of "action centres" within the company, in which individuals are empowered to take responsibility for the success of their unit and to find innovative and imaginative ways of addressing the real challenges they face (rather than the business challenges imagined in the boardroom). A process of action-reflection can then emerge, with interesting potential results.

► **Arne:** I think that this is exactly what is happening – and that by connecting these action centres with each other they will eventually change the whole system. They are building critical mass. Mainly because what these centres are doing is related to the purpose of the organisation, it is successful, and attractive. And whatever is attractive will generate much more energy and readiness to change, than a moral obligation, or the letter by management politely asking you not to be prejudiced any more and please to attend the diversity training that starts on Monday. Maybe that is one of the important thoughts to apply in youth work: aim not only at participation, but also see all the work that is done to connect different "youth action centres" as a way to create critical mass. And work from making things attractive, not normative.

So if you ask me where the potential lies for businesses to deal better with diversity, then it is in an example like this. Find an action or project that is linked to the purpose of the organisation, one that people will find worthwhile to strive for. If your (business) logic that brought diversity into the picture in the first place is right, then diversity will be part of the solution people will find. And maybe in this approach, business and youth work don't have to be so different?

One of the greatest philosophers of our time has put it this way:

"The fact is", said rabbit, "we've missed our way somehow". They were having a rest in a small sand pit on the top of the forest. Pooh was getting rather tired of that sand pit, and suspected it of following them about, because whichever direction they started in, they always ended up at it, and each time, as it came through the mist at them, Rabbit said triumphantly, "Now I know where we are!" and Pooh said sadly, "So do I," and Piglet said nothing. He had tried to think of something to say, but the only thing he could think of was, "Help, help!" and it seemed silly to say that, when he had Rabbit and Pooh with him.

"Well," said Rabbit after a long silence in which nobody thanked him for the nice walk they were having, "we'd better get on I suppose. Which way shall we try?"

"How would it be?" said Pooh slowly, "if, as soon as we're out of sight of this pit, we try to find it again?"

"What's the good of that?" said Rabbit?

"Well," said Pooh, "we keep looking for home and not finding it, so I thought that if we looked for this pit, we'd be sure not to find it, which would be a good thing, because then we might find something that we weren't looking for, which might be just what we were looking for, really".

(A.A. Milne 1928)

Notes and references :

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