INTRODUCTION

Managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other...I call such situations messes...Managers do not solve problems, they manage messes. (Meadows, 2008)

Do you remember a time when you loved playing in messes? That childlike joy, curiosity, lack of inhibition and concern for others’ judgment are the variables that researchers of creativity promote. Openness is ranked as the most important attitude and practice of all. Pioneering global innovators emulate this with organizational approaches like those of high tech innovators, where play is encouraged and somehow wonder and fascination with organizational processes and products are nurtured.

These are interesting and sometimes inspirational times. Never before has rich global diversity been so connected with sharing and learning across difference. Few have ever seen so many organizational groups, initiatives, and negotiations involving women as well as men, all religions, and cultures from almost every nation. Simultaneously, innovation is a passionate and popular focus. Many leading corporations now have chief innovation officers on their leadership teams. Prestigious business schools have added creativity curriculum. Fortune 500 companies routinely demand creativity training for employees. As the market value of creative thinking and innovation increase, however, how many organizations can truly say they are prepared to allow their employees more freedom and individuality, even eccentricity? Can large multicultural organizations somehow find their way to emulating communities of artists, writers, even scientists and computer geeks, in independent thinking and free expression? Research describes the most innovative as somehow lacking the judgmental filters that the more ordinary use to ensure conformity. Defining innovation can be approached from myriad angles, but for the purpose of this book, it will be seen as extraordinary. It will never occur with organizations, leaders, and employees bound to and caught up in the ordinary.

The research and academic discussion behind optimal approaches to diversity and innovation are necessarily complex. This book’s authors introduce theories as part of this daunting task. As editor, I am happy to join them in introducing the interdisciplinary Web and depth of intellectual history and study underlying the approaches presented here. Too many organizations, like individuals, are turning to overly simplistic self-help texts written by organizational gurus offering “flavors of the month” and “magic bullet” cures. While they may entertain and temporarily appease organizational employees, they rarely prove themselves under scientific scrutiny. On the other hand, academic theories of organizational
approaches and actual day-to-day practice often seem worlds apart. This collection aspires to, at the very least, provide approaches proving themselves both in practice and scholarly study.

I teach at one of the most diverse academic institutions in the Western States. Contributing authors come from, research, and work in several countries including China, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Thailand, as well as the U.S. We are diverse in disciplines: agricultural sciences, business management/science, communications, computer engineering, conflict resolution, digital media arts, educational leadership, history, global leadership and studies, mechanical engineering, nursing, psychology, research, teacher education (English as Second Language), training and development, and translation. While we did not intentionally aspire to nearly equal gender representation and cross-gender collaboration, we fortunately emulate both.

Scholars often refer to diversity’s potential for innovation as it creates a context rich in distinct perspectives. A few even go so far as to say that the greater the diversity, the better an organization’s chance for launching innovation. By its nature, diversity creates the disequilibrium that many believe sparks original thinking when approached with sufficient motivation. Any difference, whether in ability, philosophy, or other, will do. At the same time though, defensive and negative responses create costly conflict, misunderstanding, and avoidance. During these times of globalization and unprecedented organizational diversity, enormous constructive and destructive potential coexist. Since diversity encompasses infinite variables, particularly when examining interpersonal expectations, assumptions, ways of communicating, and problem solving, even simple differences like eye contact and interruption can create tension that compounds with every interaction across difference.

For the purposes of this book, diversity is defined as broadly as possible. It will include all the difference existing in contemporary organizations around the world, domestic, multinational, and international. Each of these organizations represents a complex system of relationships between variables. Innovation will ground the discussion with its focus on serving need and prioritize original creation that responds to need. Likewise, “[a] system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something” (Meadows, 2008, p. 11).

A close look at the organizational leaders with innovation reveals that their performance success may be linked more with organizational approaches and cultures specifically designed to stimulate and test innovation in response to market need and interest rather than organizational approaches that prioritize tapping diversity’s potential. This book aims to rectify this gap. While organizational literature and popular rhetoric abound in linking diversity and innovation, relatively rare guidance exists that practically demonstrates and explains how organizations wishing to be more innovative can and do proceed in the face of challenging difference. In addition to the research-based openness stressed earlier, the editor has found that some additional variables can help bridge difference and any degree of progress reaps rewards. If organizational employees are struggling with difference, being coached in conflict resolution practices of suspending judgment and showing interest in learning about those who are different (authentic curiosity) can be progressive first steps. They benefit both diversity and innovation. Even learning through observation rather than interpersonal contact and communication can facilitate progress. Awareness of how diverse others view us is as important as learning about them, particularly for organizational leadership. This requires continuous feedback across difference. Leadership modeling optimal organizational embrace of diversity and innovation will commit to treating all equally. Ironically, the persistence of internal bias and discrimination that hurts organizational performance appears universal. In short, it bridges culture and joins organizations in its shared challenge.

The field of conflict resolution offers several relatively easy approaches that can help organizations. The first is reframing. Organizational members can be taught how to reframe their negative perceptions
and assumptions to identify and articulate a positive core that will help create a productive climate. Ironically, less innovative members reject their own new ideas as well as those of others! Helping them be more open to and positive in their judgments of their own thinking about themselves can be an easy positive step. If members are avoiding, perhaps fearful, of difference and the new, helping them find what they find interesting, even fascinating, can help them become more open and engaged. A diverse team can begin and focus their relationships around such shared interest. The good news is that simply learning to embrace rather than avoid the challenges described above to any degree, including developing curiosity about oneself, benefits diversity and innovation.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is comprised of 16 chapters organized into 5 sections: “Revolutionary Innovation: Transformation through Embracing Diversity’s Potential,” “Performance Damaging Challenges with Proven Approaches,” “Bias Reduction,” “Diversity and Innovation as Vehicles for Organizational Learning,” and “Performance Enhancing and Pioneering Approaches.”

Section 1: Revolutionary Innovation through Embracing Diversity’s Potential

This section features three chapters, two proposing approaches to innovation that embrace diversity in ways never seen before and the third describing how this can benefit organizational potential in unexpected ways. High tech millionaires, who retire early or otherwise devote themselves to social entrepreneurship or innovative ways of meeting critical human need, likewise inspire consideration of highest organizational potential. This book aspires to do the same with these first chapters where readers are challenged to envision how far organizational innovation can go if the fundamental principles and popular adages of creativity gurus are taken seriously. For example, consider the recommended “putting two disparate elements together.” The result can be revolutionary, resulting in radical innovation. Joe Grimes of chapter 1, a professor of Computer Engineering at California Polytechnic State University, and Mark Grimes from the University of California Santa Barbara challenge teachers of engineers and engineers themselves, of all types, to bring together the disparate parts of engineering product and process design/problem solving with social justice, or evaluation of professional impact and a focus on access and sustainability. Rather than live two separated and disconnected lives, successful engineer and retired social entrepreneur, the authors challenge engineers and their organizations to embrace the revolutionary blending of the two into a radically innovative superordinate whole. One can only begin to imagine the resultant exciting possibilities and organizational as well as societal and individual transformation. All global professions and organizations can benefit from developing the practice of self reflection with a focus on evaluating impact as it leads towards the obsession of the most innovative among us that stimulates best performance, uses all senses, and mirrors the practices of the most exciting and versatile high tech innovators around the world.

Samantha Szczur of Eastern Illinois University presents a similar challenge with focus on a more traditional “diversity” topic and dichotomy: gender. She does this by scrutinizing some of the recognized global leaders with innovation, noting their apparent reluctance with going beyond diversity “rhetoric” (mission statements, Websites…) to truly embrace gender diversity in an integrated rather than public relations way. Can the reader imagine the profound forward-looking innovation that might result if high tech firms tried infusing workplace practices with approaches that prove themselves in encouraging
women to innovate in addition to welcoming them to their male bonding, competition and play? The time seems ripe for such experimentation.

Such cutting edge, state-of-the-art and even subversive approaches to diversity and innovation show promise in reaping great rewards. The authors of chapters 1 and 3 both assert that contemporary organizational leadership, particularly those best prepared to effectively and fully embrace diversity and innovation, learn by doing (through experiential learning), and what they learn in one context is showing promise with transferability to diverse contexts. Finding ways to develop such contextual intelligence appears key to approaching diversity and innovation. Matthew Kutz from Bowling Green State University and Anita Bamford-Wade of Auckland Technical University introduce readers to contextual intelligence and its contemporary promise.

**Section 2: Performance Damaging Challenges with Proven Approaches**

This section offers four chapters presenting research with case and other studies of perhaps the most challenging barrier organizations face when approaching diversity and aspiring to innovation, particularly fresh originality: the bias, close-minded judgment, and erroneous negative thinking that hinders response to need and organizational relationship building. At their worst, they destroy genuine communication. Certainly, openness to diversity is a critical starting point—the common ground where diversity and innovation meet, and as mentioned earlier, the most important variable recognized by researchers of creativity. It may also be the most challenging task to ask of organizational employees who lack openness to difference and the new. Years ago, after first arriving at the University of California Berkeley, I was asked to create a series of teaching case studies based on real world experience mediating difference in conflict. An unexpected byproduct was students’ report that grappling with tough real world organizational and other multicultural case studies helped them uncover and discover their own biases, or barriers to diversity and innovation—an essential first step in effectively approaching difference. I have now worked with clients, students, and colleagues from about 80 countries, many more cultures, and organizational functions, including engineering, service, science, human resources, ethics, and other managerial roles involved with cross-functional problem solving, teambuilding, labor-management, and customer disputes requiring complex process and multiple perspectives. A proactive approach avoids the enormous costs inherent in conflict and the loss that results from failure to embrace the potential of diverse teams. On the flip side, effectively stimulating the synergy of difference reaps great rewards.

The author of chapter 4, Curtis Friedel from Virginia Tech, offers an organizational assessment tool for measuring employee openness, suggesting that some strongly prefer conformity and sameness yet can still serve their organization’s innovation and performance by improving organizational structure and processes rather than creating truly new innovation. Employees assessed with requisite openness and related capacities like risk taking and individualism are best suited for the latter. Arguably, most contemporary organizational practice labeled innovation reflects more of the product and process improvement (adaption) described above rather than anything dramatically original. Despite organizational rhetoric and even investment in creativity training, the expectation is that employees will somehow balance conformity with scrutiny of service and other offering to meet market demand, assess need, and continually improve. If this is seen and valued as innovation, then diversity becomes a rich pool for better understanding and connecting with untapped market potential.

This presents a practical dilemma, however. Per this chapter’s model, approaching organizational diversity is a more tricky and challenging task. Organizational employees lacking openness and prioritizing loyalty to their “in groups” are ill-prepared to bridge difference. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 provide
case study evidence of this seemingly universal challenge. In chapter 5, Doris Cross examines the long-lasting and stubborn struggles of U.S. organizations. Research data shows how the U.S. is continuing to lose significant ground on multiple fronts with globalization. Its nation-long struggle with effectively confronting prejudice and ending discrimination is still hurting organizational performance. In chapter 6, authors Ken Roth of California State University Dominguez Hills and Zack Ritter of the Jewish University present research findings describing the prejudice of international students coming to the U.S. regarding African Americans, particularly males, based on media portrayals. They conclude by recommending several actual organizational practices aspiring to decrease and even eradicate misinformation about those outside one’s national or ethnic group. This interest is shared by the British organizations surveyed in chapter 7 by Wilson Ozuem of Hertfordshire and Regents University and Nicole Sarsby of the University of Wales. Case study description and survey quotes provide a rich picture of the challenges faced among diverse workforces as well as some of the approaches that employees are using to effectively address their challenges.

Section 3: Bias Reduction

Section 3 presents three chapters proposing and detailing approaches proving themselves with reducing bias: actual, perceived, and feared. All hurt both diversity and innovation. Several practical tools are provided.

In chapter 8, Mary Jo Festle of Elon University provides case study detail of one organization’s approach to and experience with decreasing and openly discussing prejudice. This organization’s relatively simple and straightforward approach proved widely popular. Enough detail is offered to replicate in other organizations.

In chapter 9, organizational psychologist Ben Tran of Alliant International University reviews the long U.S. legal history that has proved necessary to diversify organizations so they welcome and include women, minority professionals, and other protected groups. He also reviews and recommends some of the latest human resource approaches to enhancing organizational inclusion. The obvious question raised throughout this chapter and the book as a whole is how to optimally balance legal oversight and compliance with freedoms in the interests of truly and fully embracing diversity’s potential for innovation.

In chapter 10, author Joyce Chen of the University of Northern Iowa examines this two-sided challenge/opportunity using mixed qualitative methods of case study analysis, focus group discussion, and two select interviews with Chinese managers—one who has been successfully managing Americans within the U.S. After introducing relevant theoretical frameworks, she grounds her analysis through comparing anecdotal focus group and interview responses to intimately explore specific processes and experiences of cultural adaptation. The reader is given a valuable window into the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of actual Chinese managers. Noteworthy is that responses and analysis describe personal openness, even enthusiasm, with building and leading diverse teams co-existing with respect for relevant laws and policies. Both are seen as instrumental to successfully approaching diversity and innovation—at least when working in the U.S. and other Western societies like Britain.

Section 4: Diversity and Innovation as Vehicles for Organizational Learning

At the heart of all organizational approaches to diversity and innovation is learning: individual, team, leadership, and organizational, but not just any learning, certainly not the tedious constrained learning one may have suffered in a university, secondary, or elementary school. The best learning encompasses
authentic curiosity, openness, the willingness to move towards challenges, wrestle with them, and embrace in revolutionary ways, reframing, discovering common ground, and critical reflection of impact. Section 4 describes the passionate engagement, innovative and responsive approaches resulting from evidence-based teaching and learning. Most importantly, it proposes and shows that diversity and innovation themselves catalyze essential organizational learning. Embracing both inevitably leads to organizational progress.

In recent years, organizational scholars have coined and encouraged learning organizations. In chapter 11, Cochese Davis of Illinois State University and Viviane Lopuch of Marist University explore this approach in detail. They also introduce Hofstede’s seminal applied research helping organizations understand global cultures in practical ways, arguing that diverse perspectives are the road to innovation.

While at first glance, Lorraine Gilpin of Southern Georgia University and chapter 12’s evaluation of teaching and learning of English as a second language may seem irrelevant to global organizations, at second glance, with an open mind, it shows variables promoted by this book in practice: the importance of providing multiple means of learning and not discounting the most popular. In this chapter, the most popular are movies, personal meetings and conversations with diverse others, and individual reflection on and assessment of barriers to learning (bias). The best of learning organizations will find ways to provide and require these practices of all employees.

Chapter 13 can help with this task. Authors Joe Grimes of California Polytechnic State University and Mark Grimes of the University of California Santa Barbara present the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning. Following them ensures that needs and styles of diverse learners/employees will be considered and incorporated into organizational learning.

Section 5: Performance Enhancing and Pioneering Approaches

The author of chapter 14, Kijpokin Kasemsap, a mechanical engineer and professor of management sciences at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, advocates for transformational leadership in the leather factories he studied in Thailand. He describes myriad ways to move in this direction. Most intriguing as well as impressive are his assertions that Thai women might be better suited to this task than Thai men and his interdisciplinary blend of mechanical engineering and management. Both his perspective and career emulate this book’s aspirations.

In chapter 15, author Susan Cook of Metropolitan State University continues to present the skills, tools, and practices of effective multicultural collaboration with her focus on the dialogic approach to managing organizational diversity and innovation. If organizational members have reduced bias, increased openness, and found their way to authentic curiosity about difference, dialogue with diverse perspectives can have optimal results: inclusion of important stakeholders, identification of common ground (shared or mutual interest), perspective taking, or deepening understanding (“walking in another’s shoes”) and even empathy/rapport.

In chapter 16, Laura Talamante of California State University Dominguez Hills and Caroline Mackenzie of Aix-Marseille Universite provide a rich exemplary case study. Communities in two parts of the world have created mutually beneficial and deepening learning with each other. They collectively crafted an organically evolving Website of colorful and moving storytelling: the simple but profound and transformative act of bridging difference through personal meeting with the intent to understand “the other.”

Nancy D. Erbe
California State University, USA
REFERENCES


Dundon, E. (2002). The seeds of innovation: cultivating the synergy that fosters new ideas. New York: AMACOM.


