Does Diversity Travel Well? It Depends....

Cornelius Grove & Willa Hallowell, GROVEWELL LLC

The following article appeared in two installments in the May and July, 1996, issues of *Mosaics*, a newsletter from the Society for Human Resource Management, Alexandria, VA. This document is the original, uncondensed typescript.

"When I was in England, I asked one of our English colleagues how they were handling diversity. She had no idea what I was talking about!"

This story was told at a meeting we attended of representatives from several business units of a major American corporation. They were exploring the possibility of exporting diversity initiatives to the company's overseas offices and plants.

Recalling the story from England, one of us remarked, "Perhaps you should ask some questions before you take diversity abroad. There's a cultural rationale for diversity here in the U.S. that might not apply in other nations. Look before you leap."

They hired us to look before they leaped. Following is some of what we learned.

Diversity International And Domestic

Naming our project "Diversity International And Domestic," or **DIAD**, we asked. . .

- To what extent can diversity initiatives be transferred to a company's operations abroad?
- What should a company keep in mind when dealing with non-traditional employees abroad?

DIAD gathered information about societal values regarding human differences in Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Mexico. Our research was carried out by means of open-ended interviews with local nationals and seasoned expatriates from the four nations.

The DIAD project was conceived in the belief that genuine respect for human differences includes consideration of the ways in which other peoples think about human differences.

The American Mindset Regarding Human Differences

American culture is marked by the ideal of fairness. One of our core ideals is that the same opportunities, rights, and obligations apply to everyone. The "level playing field" concept captures the notion that people of roughly similar *abilities* should have an equal opportunity to get ahead in the game of life. One's demographic characteristics -- age, gender, ethnicity, parental status, sexual orientation, and others -- should not present a barrier.

Another feature of our American mindset is our strong tendency to evaluate others on the basis of what they actually accomplish in life. We are unparalleled in our determination to base status as much as possible on personal achievements and as little as possible on demographic, or "ascribed," characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, and national origin.

Americans assume that achievement is a property of individuals, not of groups. We are more highly individualistic than the people of any other culture and therefore identify less strongly with our groups (family, friends, work groups) than people in other cultures. For example, we become upset when someone is hired or promoted due to family connections.

The DIAD project convinced us that a significant difference between the U.S. and the other four nations is the relative weight given to *achievement* and *ascription* in evaluating people and assigning them status. In the U.S. the balance is tipped toward achievement. In Japan and Mexico the balance is tipped toward ascription. Germany and the U.K. are in between.

Japan: Learning to Be Discriminating

In Japan, youngsters grow up learning that they cannot exist on their own as an individual but only as a member of a group. They learn the overriding importance of fitting in and maintaining harmonious relationships in *all* aspects of life, including life at work. They learn *not* to distinguish themselves from their fellows: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

Because of the overwhelming emphasis on fitting in and preserving group harmony (*wa*), the Japanese make most of their judgements about their fellow Japanese on the basis of *ascribed* characteristics such as family background, place of birth, education (especially where one attended university), gender, and age. The overriding question about another is "Will he or she comfortably fit into our group?"

The kind of groups we have in mind include families, circles of friends, and close colleagues at work. A Japanese person feels an intense sense of obligation and loyalty to, and identity with, the important groups to which he or she belongs. Japanese groups almost always exhibit a high degree of homogeneity because people who are different in a significant way wouldn't become group members in the first place.

We Americans – especially American men – talk about building relationships as if this were a technique for attaining a goal or completing a task. This is not the case in Japan. Since the identity and survival of individuals is linked to being part of a group, relationships become the cement that binds people together and preserves their humanness. An individual is a thread in the tightly woven fabric of his or her in-groups and of society.

During our interviews with English-speaking Japanese, we soon became aware that they were using the word "discrimination" in a *positive* sense -- the way Americans use the word "discriminating," as in "discriminating taste." From the Japanese point of view, making distinctions among people is completely appropriate and socially useful. And those distinctions are based very largely on ascribed characteristics such as age, gender, family, place of birth, and education.

As one of our interviewees cogently stated, "the wellsprings of the Japanese mindset are *at a disconnect* with values such as achievement, individualism, and egalitarianism that propel diversity initiatives and programs here in the United States."

In a society where ascription plays a potent role in enabling people to evaluate one another in social as well as business life, how can the concept of equal opportunity have the significance it has for us Americans? How can diversity, which says that companies should harness fully the perspectives and talents of people from *every* background, have the same appeal?

Mexico: Modeling Companies on the Family

The Mexican upper class is small but controls a high proportion of the country's wealth. Members of the upper class emphasize their European heritage. Their class status is also based on family ties, education, social upbringing, and the network of connections one inherits by the accident of birth. It is extremely difficult for someone not born into the upper class to enter it via hard work or marriage.

Most Mexicans are indigenous *Indios*. Their appearance and social bearing set them apart from members of the upper and middle classes. In large Mexican and foreign companies, one is extremely unlikely to find an indigenous Mexican in the ranks of managers or professionals. Inequalities based on ascribed characteristics are the norm. The fact that indigenous peoples are rarely found above a certain level is *not* regarded as a social ill that needs correction.

In the Mexican family, power resides with the parents, especially the father. The seeds for what Mexicans call *respeto* are sown within the family. Parents *know* what should be done, and the child respects their authority. *Respeto* also characterizes relationships between Mexicans who have unequal power and influence. An example is *patrón-peón* (or patron-client) relationships which do not include even a hint of egalitarianism.

The Mexican view of family is their model for business organizations: We are like a family. We have enduring links with each other based on trust and loyalty. We take care of and do not embarrass each other. We show decorum and *respeto* toward each other by following authority.

There is another way in which familialism impacts Mexican business. What Americans refer to as "nepotism" is common. In Mexico, loyalty and trust are far more important criteria for hiring than achievement. People with the power to hire are expected to prefer their kinfolk.

Mexican women are expected to remain at home after marriage. Most women who work are in teaching and nursing, though some are in academia, the professions, and the arts. Women who have career opportunities are from the upper and middle classes; they have the proper connections, social graces, and physical appearance. It is not acceptable to turn over extensive responsibilities for one's children to servants, so the vast majority of working women are either pre-marriage or post-children.

Relationships in Mexico are formed far more often because of one's ascribed status than because of achievement. Relationships *lead to* achievements (or opportunities to achieve), not the other way around. We suspect that Mexicans' disinclination to pay attention to achievements would mean that diversity initiatives will receive a muted response in Mexico.

Germany: Preferring *Ordnung* and Blood Ties

Germany is an orderly country. Rank, authority, and power still command respect, and tradition remains important. Germans prefer and expect clear directives from above and the absence of ambiguity. These tendencies, which we will collect under the German word *ordnung*, are reflected in the management of German companies. Employees and managers alike are expected to fit in, to conform, to take orders and follow established procedures.

There is a burgeoning presence in Germany of people who are different from the German mainstream. So far, Germans have *not* demonstrated any concerted drive to fold non-traditional workers such as the Turks into the economic and social mainstream. There are extremely few Turks in management, for example, but among the Germans very little concern is shown about this state of affairs. (Some Turks *have* been successful economically in non-corporate careers.)

German citizenship is acquired by heredity -- by blood -- not by one's having been born on German soil. The notion of *the German nation* is one that transcends the political boundaries of Germany. Someone with German parents who never lived in Germany can arrive there and become a citizen instantly, whereas a *third*-generation Turkish worker might face significant hurdles.

With respect to women, the traditional expectation was, and is, that their primary role in life is to raise the children. The number of native Germans is diminishing, so there is a feeling that "we must support women so they can have children." Families are given money for bearing children. German women seem less enamored than American women of trying to have it all. Germans tend to view wage-earning as a time-out from a woman's proper role: in the home.

In comparison with Japan and Mexico, however, the German tendency to evaluate others on the basis of ascribed characteristics (gender, age, family background, national origin) is moderate. Educational achievement -- not merely attending the "right" schools -- carries much weight. German schools "track" students, but a student's ultimate track seems to depend as much on achievement as on background. Educational attainments are deeply respected.

The German perspective on human differences tends to apply an assimilationist model. As we said earlier, employees and managers alike are expected to fit in, conform, and take orders. This approach to human differences does not supply particularly fertile ground for "diversity."

The manner in which diversity is introduced in Germany is important. If change is going to come, it will come slowly, via established pathways and with minimal disturbance to *ordnung*. People at the top must be convinced, through logical reasoning, that diversity initiatives and programs make sense. Until they nod their assent, those below are unlikely to change.

United Kingdom: Emphasizing Self-Containment

When Americans think of the United Kingdom, many imagine sharp class distinctions like those depicted on public television's *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Our British interviewees indicated, however, that class background matters far less today than it did even a generation ago.

We did gain insight into the effect of class today through our interview with a native of the U.K. whose parents were both from Trinidad and Tobago. He reported that his background seems not to have influenced business counterparts' judgements about him. His "cultured British accent" (acquired by attending a boarding school) smooths his path to easier acceptance.

The British shy away from banding into groups and networks of like-minded people who proactively and collectively proceed to protect and advance their own self-interest. Thinking of oneself as a member of a distinct demographic group is regarded as peculiarly American. In Britain, each individual is expected to create his or her career opportunities alone, without the collective support of people sharing similar demographic characteristics.

In the U.K. today, there is high unemployment. As companies downsize, their tendency has been to make "redundant" employees over 40 rather than those who are younger. Former executives write letters to the editor complaining that they cannot get jobs even though they are highly qualified. However, there seems *not* to be any groundswell of concern about this.

Our interviewees admitted that *they themselves* use age as a criterion for hiring because (1) they believe that older people will not fit into their younger work teams, and (2) they worry that an experienced candidate would know how to do the job so well that he or she would no longer be "hungry" and capable of growth and development.

While there are laws in the U.K. protecting various groups of people such as women or the disabled, these separate laws do not get lumped together under the rubric of "diversity." This means that "managing diversity" is not conceived of or addressed in any cohesive fashion. People in the U.K. do not share our American preoccupation with the rights and opportunities of non-traditional workers.

The British virtue of self-containment is likely to hamper the development of collective awareness and action by the non-traditional workforce. Here in the U.S., we protect our *rights* by banding together. In the U.K., people protect their *individuality* by emphasizing privacy and self-restraint.

Of the four countries we studied, the U.K. seems the most receptive to diversity initiatives. The British case is not so much a matter of hostility to diversity as a matter of style. Germany, we think, is less receptive than the U.K.: the Germans' respect for academic achievement is counterbalanced by their likely concern that diversity would undermine *ordnung*. The most overwhelming cultural clashes occur in the cases of Japan and Mexico, where our American penchant for judging people by their achievements collides with their long-standing traditions of judging people by ascribed characteristics.

What we discovered is that people in other cultures aren't enamored with "level playing fields." Most don't recognize our meaning of "diversity." They don't necessarily admire us for sharing our diversity-related objectives with them. Quite possibly, they'll think something like, "Why do those Americans always think they know what's best for *everyone?*"

American Diversity Initiatives: Do They Travel Well?

We emerged from DIAD with a sense of the caveats and cautions a company should observe when it contemplates exporting its Made-in-America personnel policies and diversity initiatives.

Selection of New Employees People in certain demographic categories might need to be introduced into certain positions with enormous care. Hiring someone who does not socially "fit" into an existing work group could prove disruptive. If such a person is highly qualified, well thought-out efforts should be made to pave the way for his or her social acceptance.

Setting Goals for the Workforce Profile Plans to adjust the demographic profile of the workforce might best be based on a customer-service rationale. An ethical rationale or one stating that productivity or creativity will be increased will be met by blank stares.

Promotions and Performance Appraisals Candidates' ascribed characteristics -- most often, age and seniority -- might need to play an important role in promotion decisions. Jumping the queue can upset everyone. . .including the person promoted out of turn. During performance appraisals in group-oriented cultures, the employee should feel warmly regarded. Fitting in should be explicitly taken into account, and the employee should never feel separated from coworkers.

Mentoring and Coaching Mentoring is a fine way to develop employees abroad, but exceptional care needs to be taken when selecting the individuals to be paired. The risk occurs when people with dissimilar ethnic or national-origin backgrounds are paired; both may feel uncomfortable. Pairs involving two women also need careful inquiry to determine whether the older woman (probably traditional) is a willing and acceptable role model for the younger one.

Compensation, Benefits, and Rewards Compensation and benefits might better be thought of in group-oriented terms, not individual terms. Some employees might prefer compensation that strengthens relationships with family members or that promote the interests of their community or religious group. Rewards are tricky in group-oriented cultures: Even when an individual appears responsible for the success of a team, it might be advisable to reward the team. Rewarding the individual sets him or her apart from the others, which is resented.

Policies Regarding Sexual Orientation and Harassment Mention of sexual orientation is best excluded from widely disseminated media and personnel policies. A sharp distinction is drawn in many cultures between private and public, so open reference to sexual orientation is likely to be viewed as utterly perplexing or in poor taste. Sexual harassment is a minefield. Harassment policies need to be formulated with input from local legal counsel and opinion leaders. Harassment inquiries must be highly sensitive and private. Keep in mind that what is viewed as harassment in one culture might be an acceptable compliment in another.

Diversity Training Programs Diversity training programs probably need to be redesigned and/or delayed. Training that raises social and moral issues about the value of human differences is questionable abroad. Approaches that highlight the uniqueness of individuals or

disparage ascription as a way of sorting people out are fairly dripping with American values and therefore bound to cut against the grain of trainees in many other cultures.

Work-Family Initiatives Family-oriented initiatives such as on-site childcare might be welcomed and popular in some countries, but merely tolerated in others. These initiatives need to be adapted so as to be culturally and legally appropriate. For example, in countries where women or members of the extended family routinely care for young children, provision of on-site childcare is probably a wasted effort.

Networks of Non-Traditional Employees The impetus for the formation of any demographically defined employee network should come from the employees, not from the company. Management should determine whether formation of a network will entangle it counterproductively in local political issues, and should make inquiries about the reaction of other employees before providing support to any such group.

Preferring Non-Traditional Vendors The question of whether to seek out and prefer non-traditional vendors should be addressed in terms of relationships with others in the community. The value of existing vendor and community relationships needs to be balanced against the value of favoring non-traditional enterprises in the name of "diversity."

Recommendations for Companies That Want to Export Diversity

Is it simply a bad idea to export American diversity initiatives and personnel policies? That's *not* what we ended up believing. Instead, DIAD lead us to this three-part recommendation:

1. Choose modest diversity objectives and prefer lengthy timetables.
2. Know the local culture; recognize its limits of tolerance for changes you propose.
3. Use local methods for building agreement in favor of change.

Visit our extensive, informative website at Grovewell.com