

The global diversity practitioner dilemma



The central dilemma faced by global diversity practitioners in multi-national organisations is finding the right balance between embracing a multiplicity of cultures and maintaining the core values of the organisation throughout its operations, according to ORC Worldwide consultants Michal Fineman, Liz MacGillivray and Deirdre Golden. They argue that that balance is more likely to be achieved if the organisation, rather than adopting the traditional vertical top-down approach to implementing diversity strategy, adopts a horizontal approach and directly engages different groups at different levels across different geographies.



Many a diversity manager who has had the word 'global' added to his or her title has learned from hard experience that global diversity is not just diversity on a bigger scale or in more languages. Managing and leveraging a diverse workforce is challenging enough in one country. Multiply the challenges by the number of countries in which the company operates and square the result, and you get some idea of the magnitude of the task. If engaging senior leaders and getting support from employees is a tough job in one country, how difficult will it be to make the business case in six or 12 or 72 countries, in some of which consensus and conformity have a much older pedigree than valuing difference? If the creation and implementation of effective interventions meet obstacles in one culture, how can they possibly be made to work in multiple cultures?

Central dilemma

Underlying these challenges is the central dilemma for global diversity practitioners: finding the right balance between embracing a multiplicity of cultures and maintaining the core values of the organisation throughout its operations. Global diversity managers have learned very quickly that there needs to be some flexibility in how organisational principles are applied in the local environment, but how much flexibility is enough without jeopardising the integrity of those principles and, as a result, of the employer's brand?



One thing is clear: no global diversity manager is going to solve the dilemma on his or her own. Almost by definition, diversity management, whether focused on one country or many, requires input from a variety of perspectives. Fortunately, diversity managers have access to a large, powerful source of information and potential partners: the entire employee base – up, down, and across the organisation. We have found, in our work with multinational companies and international non-governmental organisations, that the key to understanding the many segments of a global workforce (e.g. the CEO and the Board, middle managers, rank and file employees) and to winning their support is to engage them directly in diversity management efforts. To do so successfully requires rethinking our usual vertical approach to management.

The top-down trap

Traditionally, diversity efforts are implemented the same way other operational initiatives are managed: vertically, from the top down. Senior management takes its cues from the CEO and, through the CEO, from the non-executive Board of Directors. The mandates of senior managers make their way through middle management to front-line supervisors, eventually reaching the masses of individual contributors. At every step on the ladder, individuals have their own agendas and priorities. In order to persuade them to pursue diversity objectives that will benefit the business, many organisations rely on a mixture of performance measurement and rewards and punishments. However, even companies with well-constructed accountability processes often report limits to their effectiveness in motivating changes in behaviour, especially further down the

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management ladder. Middle and front-line managers, who are further away from the seat of power and who may have less to gain and less at risk, are likely to devote their time and resources (both of which are under constant strain) to matters they perceive as more important to their function and their own interests.

The vertical construct leaves us with another dilemma. The reality is that diversity programmes are very often driven by the passion and personal commitment of a single individual, whether the diversity professional or, if the organisation is fortunate, a senior leader. But when diversity is driven by one person at the centre, it becomes all the harder to localise programmes and support. When the champion leaves the organisation, the entire effort is at risk. In fact, there are recent examples of companies that have fallen off 'best employer' lists after the high-profile diversity champion has moved on.

To avoid the trap of relying on one or two central people at the top, the aim should be to build capacity throughout the organisation and to engage as many people in as many different ways as possible, so that diversity commitment and work towards diversity goals become the norm. Over the years, global organisations have devised a number of mechanisms to mitigate the effects of vertical management by directly engaging different populations at different levels. These include:

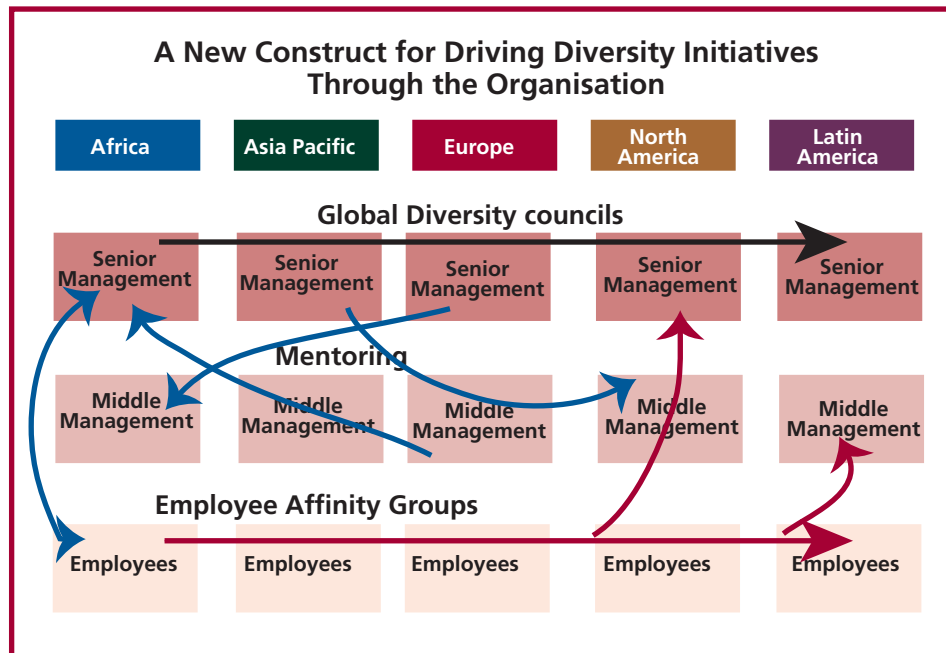
- global affinity groups/networks
- diversity working groups
- global diversity councils
- regional diversity teams
- cross-cultural teams/working
- links to external communities
- mentoring: upward/downwards, cross functions, cross geographic boundaries.

However, even when these groups exist, they frequently operate in isolation, with no links between them (e.g. between cross-cultural teams and mentoring pairs or between affinity groups and diversity teams). Even single groups can be divided by organisational or geographical boundaries. In many companies, for example, the women's affinity group in the US may have few, if any, contacts with its equivalent group in the UK or Brazil. To fully harness the interest and energy and commitment of individuals throughout the organisation and throughout the world, we believe diversity managers must embrace a horizontal management approach.

The new horizontal construct for driving diversity

Managing horizontally doesn't mean entirely giving up the structures and governance mechanisms of the vertical model, but it does mean sharing responsibility and decision-making with a broader cross-section of the organisation, and finding every opportunity to connect individuals and, especially, groups. The diagram on p.22 illustrates some of the connections that can be made. (For the sake of simplicity, we do not try to reproduce the matrixed management scheme used by many global organisations, but one could imagine another set of arrows connecting regional structures to functional and business unit structures as well.)

For example, regional diversity councils may work separately on local issues, but they can work together to teach one another about cultural characteristics and regional priorities and to identify common concerns. Since in most organisations these councils tend to be made up of more senior individuals, collaboration among them can also augment their members' networking opportunities. Council members from one region can be tapped to mentor individuals in other regions, providing valuable intercultural exchanges in both directions – upwards from the protégé to the mentor as well as downward from mentor to protégé.



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Case in point: Affinity groups

Affinity groups offer one of the most promising opportunities for linking regions and levels. Some groups – e.g. women’s or gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) networks – may have chapters or equivalent groups in each region that can work together on common agenda items and programmes. In the process they build understanding among the members and help to interpret organisational issues into locally meaningful terms. At the same time, they can feed information back to the central diversity function, helping to educate diversity leaders and senior management at headquarters about workplace issues and the local environment that may inform the diversity effort itself and broader business decisions.

Other groups may not exist in all regions, but can still contribute to global diversity. The Asian-American employees network, for example, may not have an exact counterpart anywhere outside the US. But by working with other groups within and outside North America, the group can make important alliances for the good of its members and of the company. What if, for example, the Asian-American network joined forces with the women’s network, the Latino network, and the African-American network to address issues specific to women of colour in the US? Or if the Asian-American network joined forces with the GLBT network in Asia and the talent management function to figure out how to encourage gay and lesbian native-born Chinese to accept assignments in the company’s Chinese operations?

Our research has shown the development of global affinity groups to be a nascent trend in global diversity, and one which can directly benefit the organisation’s efforts to make horizontal connections (see the box on p.24: Evolution of affinity groups). Women’s and GLBT groups are most likely to be truly global, although some companies also have global multicultural groups or global groups for people with disabilities or for parents. All of these emphasise common interests across regional or national boundaries. The advent of the internet, virtual communities and other technologies means that such groups can ‘meet’ regularly despite being physically remote, as long as time differences are factored in and technologies are available across the organisation. Particularly in high-tech companies or industries which employ many younger workers, there is a comfort with virtual networking that ameliorates geographic challenges.

Evolution of affinity groups

ORC Worldwide's research has found that global affinity groups tend to evolve along a fairly predictable pattern, starting with discrete, autonomous groups in locations outside the headquarters country and culminating in well-coordinated structures that work seamlessly across geographic boundaries and bridge local and corporate points of view. This chart indicates some of the common markers of the stages affinity groups pass through as they move along the path towards full globalisation.

Global affinity groups – best practices		
Phase one: International expansion	Phase two: Cross-border cooperation	Phase three: Global integration and leverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● affinity groups exist outside headquarters country ● diversity resources accessible to non-headquarters country affinity groups ● guidelines developed locally ● affinity group information posted on intranet in multiple languages ● affinity groups provide local professional development opportunities for members ● groups promote inclusion locally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● affinity groups in different countries develop linkages/partnerships across regions ● company-sponsored conferences/events for members outside the headquarters country ● affinity groups help develop and communicate 'value proposition' for prospective employees outside headquarters country ● groups identify local diversity issues outside home country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● global business case for groups ● groups managed and coordinated globally ● global guidelines developed ● affinity groups connect people across regions, countries, functions to share knowledge, develop products, develop global talent ● groups participate in global leadership development ● groups promote inclusion globally ● global diversity strategy enhanced

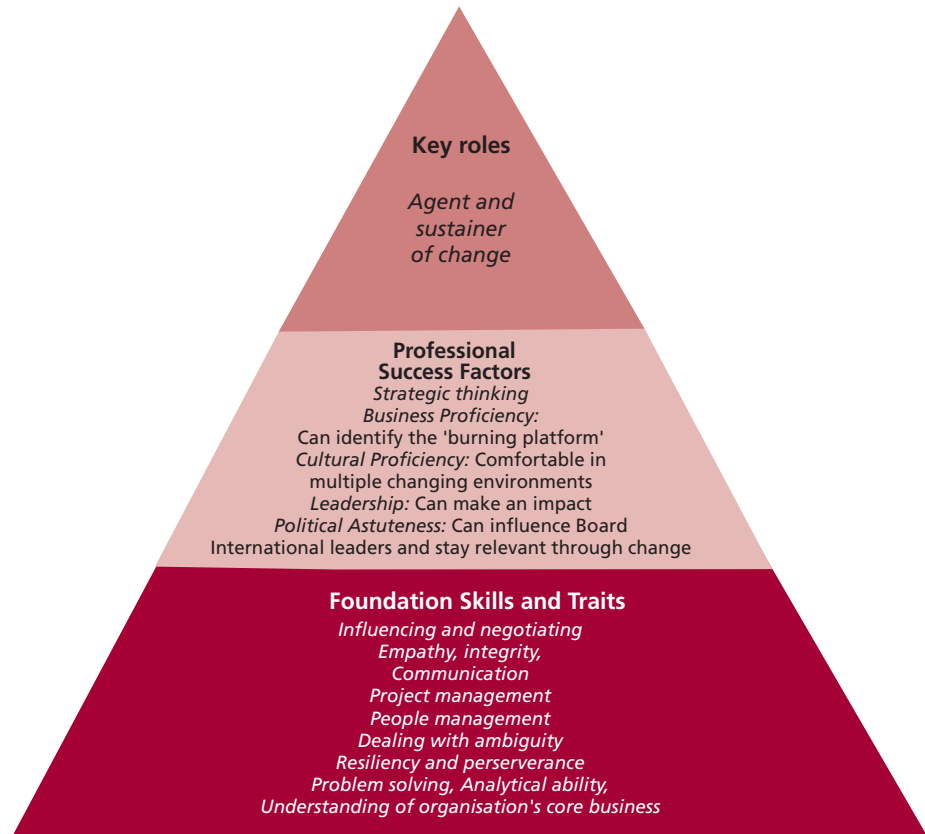
The benefits of leveraging affinity groups in this way can be considerable and immediate. One organisation that has long used its US-based affinity groups to identify high potential talent among women and people of colour is now finding that its global groups can similarly assist in the identification of under-represented high potentials outside the US. Many companies that use affinity groups to provide leadership development opportunities to the group members in the headquarters country are beginning to use global groups for the same purpose and finding that the cross-cultural experience the global groups afford their leaders is extremely valuable. But the potential for making horizontal connections through global structures such as affinity groups is only just beginning to be tapped. One of the most important contributions diversity professionals can make to their organisations will be to create, nurture, and sustain these horizontal structures and come up with innovative ways to use them.

The diversity manager's role in building horizontal structures

The diversity manager is the hub of the network: introducing potential partners, brokering relationships, providing the operational framework and guidelines and designing tools that can be used – with or without local modification – around the organisation.

Diversity practitioners will need to cultivate in themselves and their staff the capability to make change and sustain progress in a global environment, especially proficiency in navigating the political, cultural, and business landscape. The competency model above illustrates how these capabilities are grounded in turn in basic skills such as empathy, dealing with ambiguity, and influencing and negotiating.

At the moment, affinity groups are the most evident and dynamic example we are seeing of horizontal structures that companies are leveraging in order to create the broadest possible engagement in the diversity agenda. But they need not be the only mechanism. Diversity councils and taskforces, mentoring relationships, developmental programmes, and even existing international work teams have the potential to distribute cultural and business intelligence to diversity and business people at various levels and locations and, in so doing, to impact global diversity strategy, realise global talent management goals, and make the organisation more effective at what it does.



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The diversity manager cannot erect these structures from scratch by him or herself, any more than they can develop and implement a global diversity strategy on their own. But they can consider, in a thoughtful, purposeful way, which structures in their organisation are most ripe for globalisation, who are likely to be their most effective allies, and the business goals they hope to achieve through global integration of diversity efforts.

Guided by those touchstones, they can start to build the relationships and open up the channels of sharing and learning which, after all, is what diversity management is all about.

ORC Worldwide is a global workforce management consulting firm working with clients to realise their organisation's strategic goals as they relate to human capital management.
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