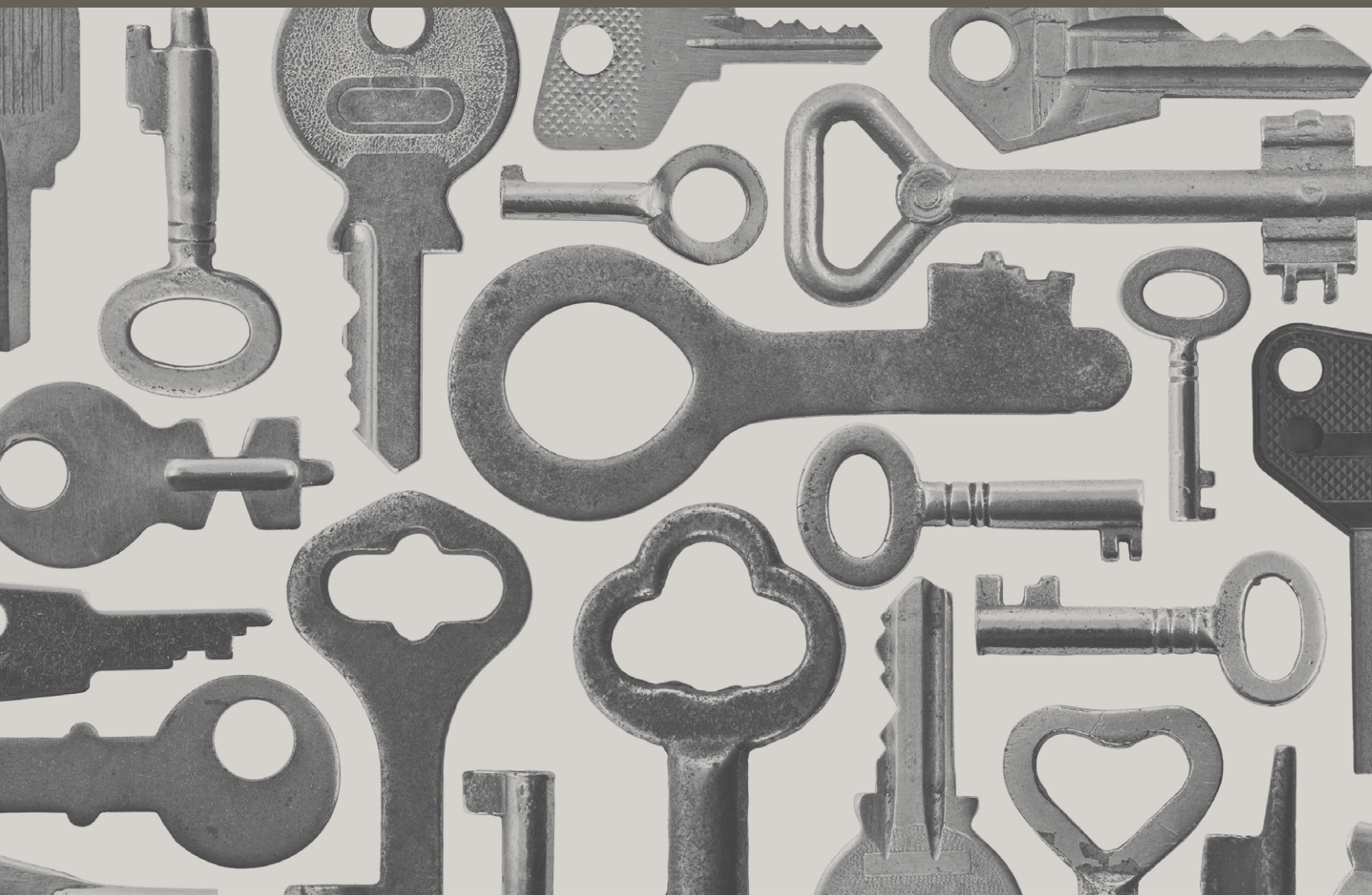


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Leveraging Diversity

3 Context Shifts Build a Culture of Curiosity

a fierce white paper

Leveraging Diversity

3 Context Shifts Build a Culture of Curiosity

SUMMARY

Appreciating diversity is not a new concept. [David Grayson](#), an American journalist born in 1870, said, “Commandment number one of any truly civilized society is this: let people be different.”

Nowadays, we realize accepting differences is about much more than creating a civilized society. The rewards are deep. When differences are embraced and authentic disclosure encouraged, the results are empowerment, engagement, [effective teamwork](#) and innovation.

Culture, age, ethnicity, abilities, gender, gender identity, race, sexual orientation and religious background are among the endless elements that make up the whole of the individual. Yet none of these characteristics stand alone. The one thing that does inclusively represent individuals is thought. By focusing on diversity of thought and ideas rather than on individual characteristics, organizations are able to organically encompass differences.

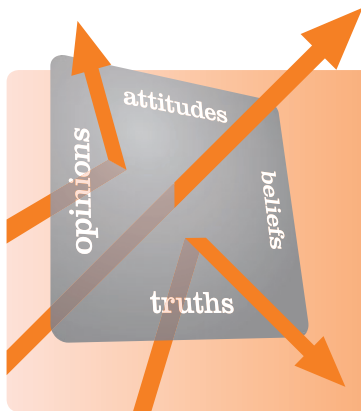
While workforces are more diverse than ever, many organizations are not leveraging the available insights. People from diverse backgrounds are actively recruited and hired, yet once they join the organization, they are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to take on the identity of the organization. Tools and techniques that promote intellectual curiosity and authentic, [fierce conversations](#) enrich group identity and strengthen the relevance of organizations.

PROBLEM

When a work environment rewards blending in rather than standing out, employers miss out on the benefits of a diverse workforce.

SOLUTION

No matter how richly diverse an organization is, it is not living up to its full potential unless it has a culture of curiosity. A culture of curiosity empowers employees to express opinions without fear of alienation or retribution. Differing opinions are not simply tolerated; they are encouraged and valued.



What is Context?

“Each of us experiences life in a unique context—a filter consisting of our strongly held opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, which have been shaped and reinforced over a lifetime. Our context determines how we experience the content of our lives.”

– SUSAN SCOTT

Excerpted from the national bestseller *Fierce Conversations, Achieving Success at Work and In Life, One Conversation at a Time*

This paper investigates three critical context shifts that help build a culture of curiosity and position organizations to leverage diversity.

CONTEXT SHIFTS FROM

TO

Focusing on Individual Characteristics



Encouraging Diversity of Thought

Executing Tactical Approaches



Building Organizational Values

Instituting Overarching Policies



Confronting Behaviors Directly

Creating a culture of curiosity requires awareness of context at the individual and organizational levels. Individuals enter into conversations with preconceived ideas and opinions. At an organizational level, context is established through what is expected, what is valued and what is rewarded. Building the self and organizational awareness to recognize context and look at situations more broadly is key to learning from others and expanding thought.

When diversity is fostered rather than engineered, diverse perspectives from all people are naturally represented.

Context Shift #1

Focusing on Individual Characteristics → Encouraging Diversity of Thought

The metaphorical phrase “you can’t judge a book by its cover” has endured as long as it has for a reason. It speaks truth and resonates with people. In a similar vein, an employee should not be judged by the generation they represent, the religion they practice or don’t practice or the socioeconomic status they were raised in. Because the combination of experiences and characteristics are so vast, it is fruitless to attempt to do so.

What organizations can do is ensure employees become skilled at culling insights from people of all backgrounds and encourage employees to interrogate their own perceptions of reality. Focus then shifts to the ideas, thoughts and thought processes of the individual.

One of the transformational ideas at [Fierce, Inc.](#) is that “all conversations are with myself and sometimes they involve other people.” In other words, everyone enters into conversations with their own opinions, beliefs and attitudes. Frequently, participants use conversations to validate previously held beliefs about others and the topics. In such cases, participants leave conversations confirming and reinforcing the same context they had entering them.

Building a work environment where diversity of thought is valued begins with the commitment to enter into conversations without making assumptions, to interrogate your personal context. The goal is to learn rather than to convince. “After all,” said Susan Scott, CEO at [Fierce](#). “I already know what I know. If I spend an entire meeting convincing others of what I know, I’ve learned nothing.” Curiosity not only encourages innovation and increases the likelihood of well-rounded decisions, it more accurately represents the people present.

Conformity Kills Creativity

Organizations understand the benefits of a workforce that represents its consumers and clients. When employee diversity mirrors the customer base, organizations have a better understanding of the clients they serve. However, if the work environment discourages the very differences it sought to engage by rewarding mindless agreement, the benefits of a diverse workforce are wasted and the organization is put at risk of falling into the trap of group think.

Diversity in and of itself is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is the creativity, innovation and insight that result from open and inclusive dialogue.

“If the overall belief is that you will gain approval or promotions by exchanging your identity for your organization’s identity, you’re not encouraged to expand thinking,” said Kim Bohr, Executive Vice President of Client Development at Fierce. “And you lose motivation to seek out diverse ideas and opinions from colleagues.”

Interrogate Reality

Reality is elusive; multiple realities can exist simultaneously and they are constantly changing. By creating a work environment that encourages employees to challenge their own realities, ask questions and revisit alternate perspectives regularly, leaders replace the potential for diverse thought with the reality of diverse thought.

Context shift #2

Executing Tactical Approaches Building Organizational Values

Tactical approaches to diversity are carried out with a limited or immediate end in view. The goal is to adhere to rules, not to build an environment of [effective teamwork](#) and innovation.

“Employees arrive on their first day and are taken through training on how to set up voicemail, how to use the email system and how to respect diversity,” said Scott. “That’s the reality in some workplaces. By lumping diversity training in with the minutia of a new work environment, diversity is devalued.” Diversity becomes a check box on a new employee immersion plan rather than a value-add and an expectation of the way business will be done.

“Adding diversity to a mission or vision statement does not make it a reality,” continued Scott. “All the right ideas may be written down, but if the organization is not living them, they’re meaningless.”

On an individual level, values are the principals through which life is lived and the context through which decisions are made. At an organizational level, value is demonstrated through what behaviors and actions are rewarded. If the mission statement declares diversity to be a core principle of the organization, yet people are discouraged from speaking up or spending time and energy investigating alternate perspectives, the organization is not proceeding in alignment with its declared values.

Provoke Learning

When diversity and inclusion are part of the value system rather than being driven by compliance, there is less need for tactical training. Curiosity becomes a part of a

company's value system and culture. People learn from each other. Inclusion is no longer something that is mandatory; it is a way to improve processes and decisions.

The recently published white paper, "[The Multigenerational Advantage: Three Strategies to Leverage the Strengths of Each Generation](#)," discusses how multi-dimensional information flow makes it easier than ever for organizations to elicit feedback and gather alternate insights from all levels of an organization.

Context shift #3

Instituting Overarching Policies Confronting Behaviors Directly

Recently, a high-level executive recalled her time at a globally respected, high-tech organization. "There was an issue with a man there," she explained. "He was making a woman he worked with uncomfortable. He would block her way to the elevator in order to talk with her and make unwelcome comments."

"Rather than dealing directly with him as an individual," she continued, "the reaction was for everyone to be taken through anti-harassment training. It was insulting."

Unnecessary policy or rule changes established to change one person's behavior not only waste time and potentially insult those who do not need to change behavior, they also result in dangerous ambiguity. Offending individuals are not directly confronted and prompted to change. As a result, behaviors are likely to continue.

Tackle Tough Challenges

Diversity challenges, by their very nature, are complex. Many have been taught to ignore differences. People may not be comfortable being confronted and are usually even less comfortable confronting others. Conducting effective [confrontation conversations](#), especially when dealing with issues of diversity, is a learned skill.

When leaders are ambiguous and indirect, nothing changes. Naming and discussing problems truthfully provides the impetus for change and builds a safe environment for the open exchange of ideas.

"Addressing attitudinal issues or discriminatory problems head on quickly shows respect for all employees," said Scott. "Progressive organizations set appreciation for diversity as an expectation and then deal quickly and clearly with individuals that do not comply."

Enrich Relationships

Confrontation conversations bring individualized and focused attention to issues. Not only is respect shown for all parties involved, a clear message is also sent to those watching. Inappropriate behaviors will not be tolerated. Observers see tough problems dealt with directly and fairly, and the culture is strengthened in multiple ways.

If conversations do not happen in a timely manner, leaders become culpable. “If there are any concerns at all,” said Scott. “Get in there. Describe what was seen. Understand there is another perspective. And get to the bottom of it.”

Conclusion

Realizing the benefits of diversity and inclusion begins when people are allowed and encouraged to be themselves. Authentic disclosure and candid [conversations](#) result in empowerment, engagement and innovation.

Organizations create a culture of curiosity when the following context shifts take place:

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Diversity of thought becomes the expectation, organizational values are engrained and inappropriate behaviors are confronted truthfully and swiftly.

A culture of curiosity brings together leaders and individual contributors from all levels and fosters an environment of open mindedness where people are receptive to differing ideas. As a result, people feel empowered to advocate for their viewpoint and are prepared to have conversations that interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges and enrich relationships.

About Fierce

Fierce, Inc. is a [leadership development and training](#) company that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Traditional programs are impersonal, complicated and disconnected from concrete results. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce, Inc. is certified as a Women-Owned Business by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council and the Astra Women's Business Alliance. Please find us in Seattle and online at www.fierceinc.com.