Never hide

A conversation with diversity thought leader Binna Kandola on *identity*

Identity could be the royal route to truly meaningful diversity – or a significant obstacle to making it work. For three decades distinguished business psychologist Binna Kandola has been working on the issues of diversity and inclusion and the central role that identity plays in achieving them. Harnessing the power of genuine diversity of ideas and perspectives is challenging, he says, but for self-aware leaders it is well within reach.

The Focus: What do you see as the relation between our identities and the roles we might seek in our professional lives?
Binna Kandola: Over the course of time, we have defined roles not just in the professions but in the wider society as well. But these definitions arose historically; they're not inherent in the roles themselves. Think, for example, of roles that are often taken to be primarily male or primarily female. I recently read an editorial from a 19th-century newspaper asserting that women were unfit to do a particular job. And the job was nursing! Now, however, nursing is often seen as a female role. So identity and role do seem to be inextricably linked – especially in terms of gender – in the minds of many people. But there is actually no inherent connection between identity and role.

In many countries, only about five percent of CEOs are women and the ranks of senior executives are largely male. With so few role models, is it possible that women simply find it difficult to connect their identities to these roles?
Role models are critical. I think if you can see people succeeding who are like you, you are more likely to remain in an organization: This is an organization that will welcome me and value me for who I am. But numbers are not enough. A government department where 40 percent of the senior roles were held by women asked us to assess how those women experienced the organization. We found that they were actually quite miserable, because they were left out of important discussions and generally not included in steering the department. They talked about that dissatisfaction to their women friends in lower levels of the department, and those women told us that they were not going to apply for senior jobs.

What about government initiatives in many countries to put more women on boards?
I applaud the efforts to increase the number of women on boards and in leadership positions, but I resist the notion that once some magic number is reached we can cease to worry about it. This is probably the third time in my working career that I've seen people pay attention to gender. Then it slips off the agenda. Inclusion will continue to be a challenge, no matter what the numbers may look like. And it will be up to organizations like yours to keep the spotlight on it.

The biases that stand in the way of inclusion are often unconscious, even normal to a certain extent. Does the practice of mindfulness – of non-judgmental focus on what is occurring in the present – apply here? Can we at least be mindful of what is likely to be biasing our view and use that mindfulness to suspend judgment?
Being self-aware is one of the most important things you can do to bridge differences. To business people with a bias for action, self-awareness may seem passive, but being aware of your own behavior is definitely an action. If you are in a meeting, ask yourself who you tend to address yourself to. If someone comes up with a good idea, do you agree only when someone who resembles you restates the idea? These are patterns of behavior to recognize, to be aware of as they are happening. And we can do this. It's known as meta-cognition. We have this wonderful ability to be able to think about what we're thinking about.

If we do have this ability and the goal is to create a sustainable culture of diversity – and by that we mean genuine deep-level diversity of thought, not just diversity of gender,

Binna Kandola _____

A business psychologist and co-founder of Pearn Kandola, Binna Kandola has spent the past 30 years working with public- and private-sector clients on some of the most challenging problems of organizational effectiveness. Through his work, his research, and his books he has had a profound impact on public policy and on organizations of all kinds, and today he is one of the most prominent voices in discussions of diversity and unconscious bias. With his wife Jo Kandola he recently co-authored the critically acclaimed *The Invention of Difference: The story of gender bias at work,* which demonstrates that gender inequality stems not from biology or evolution but from social constructs and practices. His previous book, *The Value of Difference: Eliminating bias in organizations,* begins with the premise that to make organizations more inclusive we first need to understand what drives human behavior. Currently a visiting Professor at both Leeds University Business School and Aston University Business School, he has served on numerous professional and governmental committees devoted to equal opportunity.

ethnicity, and so on – then might each individual's genuine identity hold the key?

The concept of identity is certainly central. But I would offer two qualifications. First, you often hear in organizations the expression "bringing your whole self to work." I like the expression, but you can't bring your whole self to work. There are simply some aspects of everyone that they do not want to bring to work, aspects of identity that would simply be inappropriate. But the idea of not having to hide behind a screen has a lot of merit; and, as your question suggests, it points beyond obvious differences to genuine inclusion. Second, in organizations that lack a common purpose, identity can be destructive. In that situation, diversity will actually create problems as people stubbornly cling to their unique points of view with nothing to temper them or bring them together.

One rarely hears it said that diversity can create problems. Diversity is usually presented as a purely positive and desirable condition for organizations.

We know that diversity can bring benefits to a team; but there is also a downside to greater diversity. People who work in the diversity field often don't mention that, for obvious reasons. But the research is quite clear. Diversity generates more creativity, but it also generates more tension because you have genuinely different points of view rooted in different identities. Whether that tension will produce creativity depends on the identity I present to the team and the extent to which people on the team, in the moment, are prepared to listen.

Clearly, a large part of the responsibility for creating deep-level diversity and inclusion falls on the leader of the organization as well as leaders of teams throughout the organization. To extract the real value of diversity of thought you must be able to manage both the tension and creativity you mentioned, an ability we look for when we assess leaders.

What the research seems to indicate is that a leader's expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Leaders who believe that diversity and inclusion will produce tangible benefits behave in a way that is consistent with that belief and, as a result, reap the benefits. Leaders who believe that diversity and inclusion will not produce benefits behave in a way that excludes people. When the benefits fail to materialize, those leaders use that fact to justify their initial skepticism about diversity.

How should team members react when they are faced with a leader who disdains diversity or who does not listen to other ideas, other voices?

When a leader lacks self-awareness, team members are responsible for providing feedback, to point out that the leader is not paying much attention to ideas coming from some of the members of the team. Providing that feedback can be a real challenge. The leader may be offended, may bluster, and deny the behavior. However, the research indicates that such feedback, even when done very tentatively and politely, can be enough to get leaders to begin questioning their behavior and become more self-aware. But the team members must have the courage to provide the feedback.

In a sense, you are saying that leaders should be more open-minded in order not to exclude possibilities and ideas from all sources. Is there a danger that too much inclusiveness could cause deliberations and discussions to drag on endlessly, never reaching closure?

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A client of ours has just conducted some research that speaks to that very question. Some very senior leaders underwent a diversity and inclusion program; a comparable group of leaders did not. The client then compared the performance of the two groups. They found that decision-making was faster among teams led by people who had been through the program and were seen as inclusive leaders. That result is counterintuitive. We would expect that the leader would spend a great amount of time eliciting opinions from each team member, trying to give everyone equal air time, and withholding his opinion in order not to short-circuit debate. But in fact what happens when everyone feels included is that discussion proceeds much more naturally and efficiently. People feel free to agree, disagree, or criticize and to get to the point. They don't have to tiptoe around the leader or other powerful members of the team and they are confident that they will be heard, unlike on teams that lack inclusiveness. And the client found that the inclusive teams not only made faster decisions, they made better decisions.

Is there a tension between fitting in and maintaining your own individuality? In our work with large organizations we often find two diametrically opposed approaches to on-boarding people who might be said to differ from the dominant culture. One approach assures the new hire that it takes some time to learn the ropes and to fit in. The other approach immediately encourages the new hire to tell the new company what she knows that they don't know.

Being treated as an individual is something you have to earn by demonstrating to people that you can deliver on things for them. In the 1950s, the social psychologist Edwin Hollander developed the idea of the "idiosyncrasy credit." The basic principle is that once you have been accepted by a group and you deliver on things for them, the more idiosyncratic you are allowed to become. So if you have some edges on your personality but you have delivered for the group, people are likely to say things of you like "you have to take him as he is, but he does get things done." If you haven't delivered and you're just a "spiky" character who is unpleasant to be around, team members likely will not see what you bring to the organization, apart from trouble.

But couldn't "spikiness" be as much a characteristic of diversity as race or gender and the like, and couldn't it be a more reliable indicator of genuine diversity of thought on a team than, say, gender or ethnic balance?

You can have a team sitting around the table, and they can look very diverse on the surface. But in

A video interview with Binna Kandola can be found at www.egonzehnder.com/the-focus/video

terms of the way they actually operate, they're quite uniform. They all agree with the leader; they engage in groupthink; they go along to get along. Interestingly, of the institutions that experienced difficulties in the recession, Lehman Brothers, which precipitated the crisis, was in superficial terms the most diverse. They had diversity in terms of visible characteristics, but they all thought the same way.

How do we make sure we really see and welcome the individual who is significantly different?

First, unless the necessary degree of openness exists within the majority, you will smother any kind of individuality. You have to be open, to reach out and ask what that person's uniqueness in terms of experience, personality, or background will bring to the organization. And you have to listen mindfully to the answers.

I would argue that some very recent public disasters were caused, in part, by an inability to listen to other people. My colleagues and I have looked at three such situations: the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the Lance Armstrong cycling scandal, and a group of hospitals where mortality rates were inordinately high. In all three cases, we found a climate where people did not feel they could speak up. That is a lack of inclusion. People were not able to be themselves and say, "Actually, what is going on in this organization is wrong." So you run real risks when you fail to create that deeper level of inclusion.

Second, leaders must frame diversity in a genuinely positive way. They must make it clear that diversity and inclusiveness are important not merely as a matter of policy, but because it is good for business, it is the right thing to do, and we are determined to harness it more effectively. People will feel that the organization is something that they want to be a part of, something they can identify with, regardless of where they come from or who they are.

The interview with Binna Kandola in London was conducted by Karoline Vinsrygg and Andrew Roscoe, Egon Zehnder London.