



CHAPTER ONE

We Can't Ignore Diversity

Each summer, a tour group of approximately 75 international high school students travel across Canada. They are Rotary Exchange Students and represent over 40 different countries¹ – from Brazil to Bangladesh. As a Rotarian, I am involved with hosting the group for the one evening while they are in Regina. During one of these tours, I asked a girl from Denmark if she experienced conflict while spending time with people from such different cultures. “Absolutely,” she said. “When it happens, we just throw up our arms, say, “It’s cultural” and walk away.”

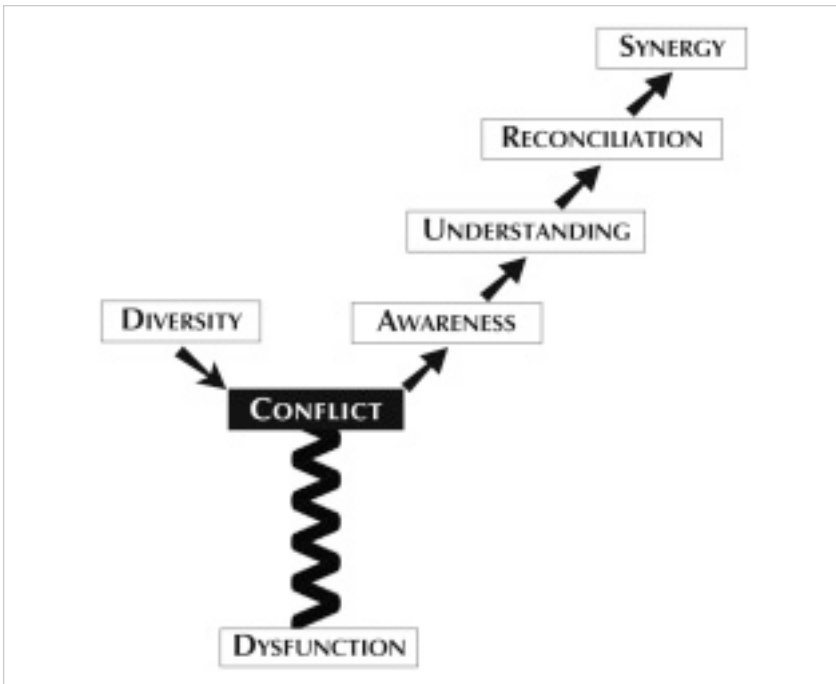
Whether we are students or employees, we may spend a major part of our day with people we would not socialize with outside of the workplace. We just don't seem to have much in common and those differences often create conflict. For the students on the bus tour, having the option of walking away is a good one. But this option is hardly realistic in the workplace where we may be working cubicle to cubicle with the person we are experiencing conflict with.

While diversity can be problematic and can trigger conflict, toxic work groups, low morale, harassment, misunderstandings and employee turnover, it can also be wonderful. It can create benefits for individuals and organizations when diverse perspectives are utilized to create synergy to move an organization forward.

War & Peace In the Workplace

Many organizations have adopted a respectful workplace or harassment policy to combat the challenges of a diverse workplace. But this isn't enough to minimize diversity-based conflict or to realize the benefits of a diverse workforce. We need to shift how we perceive and work with others.

The diagram below illustrates the choice we have to make regarding diversity in our workplace. Diversity creates conflict. Once conflict exists, do we allow our relationships to spiral down into dysfunction? Or do we become aware of how we perceive the world, understand the differences between ourselves and others, and work towards reconciliation?



This book is titled *War and Peace in the Workplace* because many of the workplaces I see in client organizations are described by employees as war zones and their workmates as either enemies or allies. Many of our workplace conflicts can be traced to our diversity - both our diversity in the big 'D' issues such as race, gender, or ability but also diversity in the small 'd' issues such as values, marital and family status, age or thought processing.

War & Peace In the Workplace

The symbol at the beginning of each chapter resembles a globe in an oyster shell. Our workplace is becoming more diversified as the world becomes smaller. We do business across the globe when we used to do business down the street. We have immigrants coming from every continent on the planet with their own religious beliefs, cultural norms, languages and way of being.

As an example of our world becoming smaller, consider that Toronto, Canada's largest city is considered to be the most diverse major city in the world, with 175 different countries of origin represented.² According to Randy McLean, Manager of Economic Policy for the City of Toronto, of the 2.5 million people who live in Toronto, 45% are visible minorities and 50% of that group are born outside of Canada. Understanding and managing diversity is vital for Toronto and is a growing priority across the country.

Like the oyster pearl, we are many layered. We are different from our co-workers in many ways and all of these diverse layers can create conflict if we are not conscious of how we think about ourselves and others.

No one wants a workplace that feels like a refugee camp where the future is uncertain and day-to-day life carries a world-weary hopelessness. We have choices as to whether our workplaces are war zones or enriching environments. We have more control than we realize to avoid dysfunction and move through awareness, understanding, and reconciliation to synergy.

ENDNOTES

1. Rotary International Student Exchange program is a year-long exchange for grade 11 and 12 students between two countries where Rotary Clubs are willing and able to host. The students attend school and cultural events in their host country while acting as ambassadors for their home country. The goal of this program is to work towards world peace and understanding.
2. Randy McLean in telephone interview July 2005.