

This piece was written for a local newspaper, *The Olympian* while serving as a member of the Diversity Panel from 2007 through 2008.

Working with diversity means finding commonality

By David Whitfield | For The Olympian • Published August 08, 2008

My very first consulting job was with an international bank in Frankfurt, Germany, with 44 different nationalities among its staff. After getting advice from one of my former students who worked there, the senior bank officer called me on a Friday afternoon and asked how they could manage or work with that amount of diversity. After we hung up, I made a cup of Jacobs Kronung, strong German coffee, and sat up for hours doodling, thinking and trying to figure out how to help this bank with its diversity concerns.

Having taught human relations in organizations, I thought of potential differences among the nationalities, intra-group differences, differences in age groups, etc.

Sometime between midnight and 2 a.m., I had an epiphany: I thought of commonalities among the bank's staff. I wasn't sure if the theories in my head would work; I was certain that trying to manage that magnitude of diversity would be daunting. And when I met the bank officer for breakfast the next morning, he agreed with my idea of focusing on his staff's commonalities. Ten years later, Lawrence Graham confirmed my thinking. He wrote the book titled "Proversity."

Graham posits that diversity looks at differences and thus divides us. "Porversity" looks at our commonalities: goals, aspirations, work ethics, skills, talents, etc. "Proversity" asks what commonalities we bring to the vision, mission and goals of the organization, family, community or nation.

How can leaders lead when they focus on differences? According to Graham, when we're obsessive with bias, we lose sight of what's important; we lose creativity and we forget the basics. He adds that "Proversity" acts as a force that brings people together from all backgrounds, finding those common interests and goals we all share.

But is it that simple? To see commonalities among us, we also need to clearly and deeply understand the circumstances that help divide us, be it systems, attitudes, world views, expectations, values, backgrounds and more. I advocate a balance of exploring differences and building new space to draw on our commonalities. In my experience, this requires, courage, transparency and curiosity from all. These three qualities can help foster the kind of space needed to learn about and from each other — authentically. I think the anonymous author says it best:

"You and I — We meet as strangers, each carrying a mystery within us.

"I cannot say who you are. I may never know you completely. But I trust that you are a person in your own right, possessed of a beauty and value that are the Earth's richest treasures.

"So I make this promise to you: I will impose no identities upon you, but will invite you to become yourself without shame or fear.

"I will hold open a space for you in the world and allow your right to fill it with an authentic vocation and purpose. For as long as your search takes, you have my loyalty."

— Anonymous

The potentialities from the above line of thinking are infinite.

