



The Need to Understand One Another

by Peter M. Senge

Years ago, before diversity became an almost faddish concern for managers everywhere, a wise older gentleman, John Bemis, helped me see the deep connections between the coming "systems age" and the need to understand differences in people. "Understanding a system," John observed, "means understanding the people who make up that system. And those people are all different."

John's comment seems more prescient as our world becomes increasingly interconnected. Events in one place can literally echo around the world in a matter of hours or even minutes. Formerly secure enclaves of homogeneity can no longer live in isolation from one another. Gradually, we are realizing that our lives are affected by many people who are different from us. The "systems age," as John pointed out, is really, in more personal terms, the "age of diversity."

So it should come as no surprise that societies everywhere in the world are struggling with how to live harmoniously with difference. Few are succeeding. Corporations endeavoring to become more "global" are finding that what globalism means in personal terms is working across cultural boundaries. Private- and public-sector organizations alike are wrestling with increasingly diverse workforces—in many areas, groups previously labeled "minorities" in the U.S. now constitute majorities.

But the challenge of understanding diversity does not apply just to cultural,

ethnic, or racial diversity. Within organizations, there are many diverse subcultures, such as the functional "silos" or "chimneys" that divide manufacturing, sales, marketing, and research. Often, little real understanding, empathy, and cooperation exist between subcultures. In the old hierarchical model, the name of the game was "do your job and please the boss." Now it's about working and learning with people whose experience, education, gender, and professional affiliation all differ.

But diversity can just as easily represent an opportunity as a problem. Difference is the wellspring of innovation. People who see the world differently have fresh ideas and see new possibilities. Difference is what makes life challenging and surprising. Although predictability may afford comfort, it also stultifies creativity and imagination. Qualities we value deeply, like harmony and beauty, spring from diversity—a rainbow is far more beautiful than a single color, and a chorus moves us with its blend of different voices.

Of Categories and People

The challenge of working productively with diversity begins with understanding how we perceive others. Recognizing differences *requires* making distinctions. But most distinctions we invoke regarding people are based on inherited assumptions and unexamined stereotypes. Those distinctions then become the basis for automatic judgments and evaluations, which then reinforce the

stereotypes. The basic problem is twofold: (1) most categories we invoke are inherently evaluative; and (2) we tend to invoke and act on these categories automatically, with little awareness of how these assumptions are actually driving our perceptions and actions.

Given this dual challenge, many theorists have advocated explicit, non-judgmental sets of distinctions for understanding differences. Some of those have become well known and widely used. Today there are literally dozens of such category systems being taught to educators, managers, and other professionals interested in dealing with difference more effectively. Using such approaches, we can come to appreciate the different ways that people learn, solve problems, and interact with others.

But although they can be useful, I have always been somewhat uneasy with the "categorization systems" I have been taught. Part of me rebelled against the feeling of being "put into a box." I also worried about just embedding another set of categories invoked automatically. What about this approach, I wondered, will make us more aware of how we invoke categories in thinking about ourselves and each other?

Human Dynamics

One framework for understanding human functioning that does provide a way to become more aware of how we view ourselves and others is Human Dynamics (see "Human Dynamics: An Overview"). Given my apprehension about category systems, the first thing that surprised me when I was introduced to Human Dynamics five years ago was that it felt comfortable, although I had no idea why. Even before I understood it fully, it was compelling—it made deep sense.

Over time, I began to see how deeply each distinct "personality system" within Human Dynamics was appreciated and valued. This experience helped me understand one of my past

difficulties with category systems: in learning most theories, I *did* form judgments. I did think it was better to be one kind of person rather than another. I was secretly proud of the way I was. My old habits of judgment and evaluation were subtly reinforced. But as I learned Human Dynamics, nothing like that happened. One of the foundational strengths of Human Dynamics, I now realize, is that the differences among the personality dynamics are truly a source of richness to be celebrated and appreciated, without *any* implicit judgment.

There is also a kind of "meta-theory" underlying Human Dynamics: that all human beings are questing for wholeness, although our developmental paths vary. Understanding the "developmental continuum" for each personality dynamic is very different from being "stuck in a box." It leads to seeing each of us as a *process* rather than a *thing*. As I have come to appreciate this more fully, I am gradually seeing new and unexpected aspects of myself and others. I am becoming more curious, more open to surprise. Perhaps this is the key to a system that actually makes us *more* rather than less conscious in our dealings with each other.

The Coming Knowledge Era

Today, we hear much talk about the "knowledge-based economy" and about knowledge and learning as the key competitive advantage in business. What we don't often realize is that behind such statements is a simple mandate: we must understand people better and more deeply than ever before, and must therefore embed in our institutions a continual curiosity to understand ourselves and each other. During the industrial age, people were fundamentally viewed as a type of resource "standing in reserve" to support an organization's needs. The industrial age thus required only rudimentary understanding of human nature, because most workers

served essentially as interchangeable parts.

But the knowledge era will require much more sophistication in understanding one another. Knowledge matters only when it is embodied in people. Likewise, knowledge is generated only by people. So if knowledge and learning are indeed becoming a key source of competitive advantage, the industrial-age view of people will have to change. In the future, understanding the diversity of human functioning will play a central role in the success and sustainability of both organizations and societies. Human Dynamics, with its simple, yet elegant, framework for understanding the diversity of human functioning will be an important part of this process. Nothing less will suffice in order for businesses to thrive, schools to offer

genuine opportunities for growth and learning for all children, and societies throughout the world to be peaceful and to nurture a sense of community and belonging for all. ■

Peter M. Senge is director of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning.

This article was excerpted from the forward to the book, Human Dynamics: A New Framework for Understanding People and Realizing the Potential in Our Organizations, (Cambridge, MA: Pegasus Communications), 1996.

Further Reading: Sandra Seagal and David Horne, "Human Dynamics: A Foundation for the Learning Organization," *The Systems Thinker*, May 1994.

Human Dynamics: An Overview

Human Dynamics is a body of work based on investigations undertaken since 1979 involving more than 40,000 people representing over 25 cultures. It identifies and documents inherent distinctions in the functioning of people as *whole systems*.

Human Dynamics explores the interaction of three universal principles: the mental (or rational); the emotional (or relational); and the physical (or practical). The mental principle is related to the mind—to thinking, values, structure, focus, objectivity, and perspective. The emotional principle is concerned with relationships—with communication, organization, feelings, and putting things together in new ways (creativity). The physical principle is pragmatic—it is the making, doing, and operationalizing part of ourselves.

Each of these principles is present in every person, but they combine in nine possible variations to form distinct "personality dynamics." Each constitutes a whole way of functioning that is characterized by distinct processes for learning, communicating, problem-solving, relating to others, contributing to teams, maintaining well-being, and responding to stress. The personality dynamics appear in every culture, characterize males and females equally, and can be observed at every age level.

Source: Sandra Seagal and David Horne, "Human Dynamics: A Foundation for the Learning Organization," *The Systems Thinker*, May 1994.