

Building a House for Diversity

by R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.

Excerpts from the book:

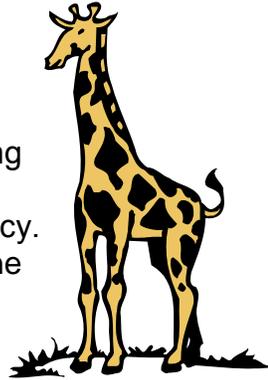
In Thomas' book, *Building a House for Diversity* 1999¹, he shares how a fable about a Giraffe and an Elephant offers new strategies for today's workforce regarding diversity. During our session on Diversity and Inclusion there was a variety of opinions on this issue. I recommend that we review Thomas analysis of the fable and his use of the fable as a metaphor in examining this very complex issue. I believe that it will put us on the same page and provide us a framework in which to conduct our investigation.

Book Excerpts

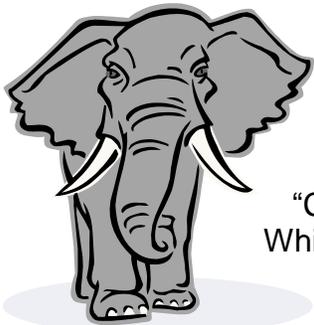
In a small suburban community just outside the city of Artiodact, a giraffe had a new home built to his family's specifications. It was a wonderful house for giraffes, with soaring ceilings and tall doorways.

High windows ensured maximum light and good views while protecting the family's privacy. Narrow hallways saved valuable space without compromising convenience. So well done was the house that it won the National Giraffe Home of the Year Award.

The home's owners were understandably proud.



One day the giraffe, while working in his state-of-the art woodshop in the basement, happened to look out the window. Coming down the street was an elephant. "I know him", he thought.. " We worked together on a PTA committee. He is an excellent wood worker too. I think I'll ask him in to see my new shop. Maybe we can even work together on some projects" So the giraffe reached his head out of the window and invited the elephant in.



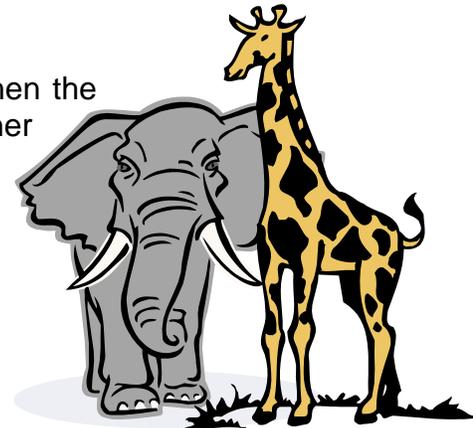
The elephant was delighted; he had liked working with the giraffe and looked forward to knowing him better. Besides, he knew about the woodshop and wanted to see it. So he walked up to the basement door and waited for it to open.

"Come in; come in" the giraffe said.. But immediately they encountered a problem. While the elephant could get his head in the door, he could go no further.

"It's a good thing we made this door expandable to accommodate my woodshop equipment", the giraffe said. "Give me a minute while I take care of our problem". He removes some bolts and panels to allow the elephant in.

The two acquaintances were happily exchanging woodworking stories when the giraffe's wife leaned her head down the basement stairs and called to her husband; "telephone, dear; it's your boss".

"I better take that upstairs in the den," the giraffe told the elephant .
"Please make yourself at home, this may take a while".



¹ Thomas, Jr R 1999 *Building a House for Diversity*, America Management Association New York (ISBN) 0-8144-046304 p.3 -9.

The elephant looked around and saw a half-finished project on the lathe table in the far corner, and decided to explore it further. As he moved through the doorway that led to that area of the shop, he heard an ominous scrunch. He backed out scratching his head. "Maybe I'll join the giraffe upstairs." he thought but as he started up the stairs, he heard them began to crack. He jumped off and fell back against the wall. It too begin to crumble. As he sat there disheveled and dismayed the giraffe came down the stairs.

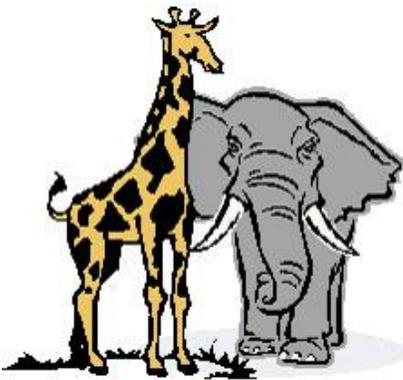
"What on earth is happening here?" The giraffe asked in amazement.

"I was trying to make myself at home," the elephant said. The giraffe looked around, "Okay, I see the problem. The doorway, it is too narrow. We have to make you smaller. There's an aerobics studio near here. If you take some classes there, we could get you down to size."

"Maybe," the elephant stated, looking unconvinced. "And the stairs are too weak to carry your weight," the giraffe continued. "If you go to ballet classes at night, I'm sure we can get you light on your feet. I really hope you'll do it. I like having you here."

"Perhaps" the elephant said. "But to tell you the truth, I'm not sure that a house designed for a giraffe would ever really work for an elephant, not unless there are some major changes."

We've all heard the saying a picture is worth a thousand words. Experience tells me that a picture story may be twice as powerful. The giraffe's and elephant's story helps people understand the dynamics of diversity; what it really is, how it works, how we have traditionally dealt with it, and why our efforts have so often fallen short. This particular story has much to teach us.



The true meaning of diversity:

The elephant and the giraffe represent a diversity mixture which has been defined as any combination of individuals who are different in some way and similar in others. It is in this collective mixture that's true diversity lies.

This is a critical concept that challenges us to abandon our accustomed ways of thinking about diversity: that in any situation, organization or society there are the "main" people and then there are the "others". Those who are different in some way usually race or gender. In this traditional view it is the others who constitute the diversity.

Once we begin to see diversity as a total collective mixture, made up of the main, ones who are also the others, it becomes obvious that diversity is not a function of race or gender or any other us-versus-them dyad, but a complex and ever-changing blend of attributes, behaviors, and talents.

The giraffe and elephant forms a diverse mixture of animals. They are similar in important ways; they live in the same neighborhood, share several interests; woodworking, PTA involvement, have congenial attitudes toward each other, and a desire to become better friends. But they are also different in several critical ways, - size, weight, and shape, and those differences prove to be their undoing.

In our story the giraffe represents the main group; it is his house, his design, his rules. He is in charge. The elephant is the other. He is warmly invited and generally welcomed, but in the giraffe's home he is the outsider and always will be. The house was not built with the elephant in mind.

Traditional approaches to diversity:

The experience of the giraffe and elephant also illustrates the essence of the three usual ways business organizations and institutions have chosen to deal with adversity; *affirmative action, understanding differences, and diversity management.*

When the giraffe decides to invite the elephant to visit he makes a special effort to help him in by removing a panel to widen the door. This is affirmative action, which focus on inclusion and calls for special action to correct imbalances.

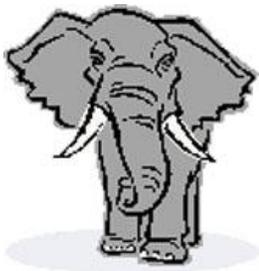
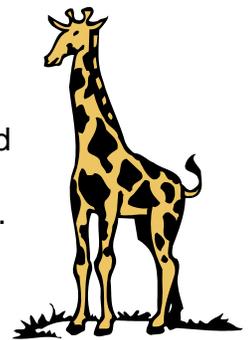
The giraffe and elephant get along well. The giraffe invites the elephant in because he enjoys his company and wants to know him better. The elephant accepts the invitation for the same reason. This is understanding differences, which focus on relationships, how people in organizations and institutions get along.

When the visit proved disastrous, the giraffe proposed several corrective actions that the elephant should take. The elephant, however, resisted bearing the full burden of making the necessary changes. He thought that maybe they should also modify the giraffe's house. This two-way perspective is diversity management, which seeks to create an environment that accesses the talents of all disciplines.

Whose house is it?

In the chapters that follow, I (Mr. Thomas) will be using the elephant and giraffe metaphor for humans, especially humans at work, where all of the dynamics of diversity springs from the mixture of two types of people: those in the dominant group and those in a subordinate position. Dominance can be but is a necessary link to it a numerical majority. For example, whites were in the numerical minority in South Africa, yet they controlled the country for a long time. Similarly, women are in the numerical majority in many organizations but are often placed in subordinate roles. (This seems to be the case in many church denominations).

Members of the dominant component – the giraffes – are the people in control. They, or their ancestors, built the house. They decide the policies and procedures, set up the underlying assumptions for success, and establish systems to reflect those assumptions. Giraffes know the unwritten rules for success because they created them. They know how to play the game so they will win. They have a major voice in who is allowed to enter the organization and whether they will succeed or merely be tolerated.



Subordinate component members – the elephants – have little or no power. They are the newcomers, the outsiders. They lack the insider knowledge, yet they must somehow fake out the unwritten rules for success and make the necessary adaptation. Their own interests/needs are not incorporated into the organization's environment, and in fact they feel pressured to ignore them or set them aside. To get along in someone else's house, they must leave their needs and their differences at the front door.

Head Giraffes in action:

If giraffes are the people who own the house, and giraffes are the people who are ultimately in charge. It is they who decide where the organization will go and how it will get there. And it is they who determine the culture that exists inside the house.

The attitudes, beliefs and practices of chief executive officers – head giraffes of organizations or educational institutions – have an enormous impact on what happens and how; within their organizational house. Theirs is an all encompassing charge.

A head giraffe who demonstrated an extraordinary level of skills and maturity in dealing with diversity and diversity management was the head of a basketball team known as the Chicago Bulls, his name was Phil Jackson. In 1988 Phil Jackson assumed the role of the Bulls coach with the dream of winning a championship in a way that combined his two greatest passions; basketball and spiritual explorations (defined as examining the relationship between the inner and outer life). Phil Jackson combined the diverse talents of Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippin and a very unique individual Dennis Rodman with the rest of the team to secure a string of championships. Phil Jackson handled his basketball team with all the instinctive knowledge of a highly skilled diversity manager. (End of excerpts)

Recommendation 5

From: The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color

“Create culturally appropriate persistence and retention programs that provide wraparound services to increase college completion for men of color...”



Higher education plays a vital role in ensuring the success of young men of color. To reach the shared goal of increasing attainment among men of color, two- and four-year colleges and universities should strengthen persistence and retention strategies that are aimed at retaining men of color in college and increasing their graduation rates. This requires that more institutions provide research-based solutions to aid students. Higher education institutions must have an institutional commitment to diversity, and they must be intentional in their commitment by devoting time, attention and the required resources. Also, there must be constant engagement and active participation by everyone — faculty, student affairs professionals, staff, administrators and students.

Numerous examples of persistence and retention programs aimed at young men of color have been implemented at colleges and universities across the country. Some of these programs are showing evidence of improved educational outcomes for young men of color with increased persistence and graduation rates for the students who are targeted by these programs.”²

² Lee, J., Jr., Ransom, T. (2011). The educational experiences of young men of color: A review of research, pathways and progress. Report commissioned by the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center. Washington, DC (p. 80).

Diversity and Inclusion activities are simple ways to get people talking and listening to one another. It is only through understanding each other that we truly gain knowledge and can move forward together. While we can't always walk in someone else's shoes, we can take the time to inquire about how the shoe fits and. Icebreakers and activities are adaptable to your group and situation. When considering an icebreaker or activity, be sure to keep specifics about your group in mind, such as age and meeting focus. Please don't overlook an icebreaker or activity because you think the group is too mature for it. Many groups, once aware that it's ok to relax and have fun, will enjoy the experience of "being able to let go," if only for a moment. Icebreakers.