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THE COVID TEST OF ORGANIZATIONS
DIVERSITY AS AN ASSET

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The covid-19 pandemic has imposed restrictions on organizations, forcing them to rethink how they work. Although the limitations were the same for everyone, companies reacted differently, making organizational decisions according to their inclinations: some adapted to the transformations in a more flexible and proactive way, others encountered resistance in the change of mentality and approach to work. The article analyzes Intercultural Viability—the probability that a company facing unexpected events will be able to adapt to the changes— in relation to how diversity was treated in the context of emergency restrictions. Organizations higher in Intercultural Viability were more likely to use virtual meetings and other changes to support a climate of respect for diversity, while lower-scoring organizations resisted changes and were more anxious to return to the pre-pandemic conditions.

Autori di altri Paesi – siano essi studiosi, manager o consulenti – ci aiutano a inquadrare le problematiche organizzative in una prospettiva globale. Questi contributi sono pubblicati in lingua originale.

Researchers are always on the lookout for natural experiments – situations outside laboratories that offer the opportunity to compare different responses. Unfortunately, the covid-19 pandemic has been exactly such a situation. Organizations of all types were subjected to more or less the same quarantine restrictions, but they made different choices in how to adapt to those restrictions. The analysis of those choices will continue for years to come as their consequences become clearer, but it is already possible to make some informed speculation. In this short article, I look at one narrow but important dimension of organizational behavior: how cultural diversity is treated as an inevitable condition and potentially valuable asset in both domestic and global workforces.

In pre-Covid times, cultural diversity was already becoming a more insistent issue in organizational human relations (Bennett, 2019). Cultural diversity refers to group differences in worldview associated with nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, age genera- tion, sexual orientation, and other categories of group experience. Ironically, the growing concern with diversity was being driven by the increased mixing of those kinds of cultural groups. Contrary to the melting-pot myth, cultural mixing does not automatically reduce cultural disparity; instead, more contact with cultural diffe- rence leads to more emphasis on the differences. Increasing rates of national and ethnic migration, along with more overt affiliation with various forms of group identity, have created profoundly mul- ticultural conditions in both societies and organizations.

In the past, many organizations have lumped together individual diversity with group diversity. But group diversity is not the same as the well-known types of individual diversity such as personality, cognitive and emotional intelligence, and other personal characteristics. Those kinds of individual differences tend to get the most attention in social science research – particularly in individualistic Western societies where there are lots of tests available to measure them. In contrast, group differences are more difficult to measure, and they are more likely to be avoided in the name of political correctness or loyalty to a uniform corporate culture. Yet cultural differences are the key elements in contributing alternative perspective and potential creativity to workgroups.

DEALING WITH DIVERSITY IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID RESTRICTIONS

Recently my colleagues and I have collected data from a number of organizations with the Intercultural Viability Indicator (IVI) (Bennett, 2021). "Intercultural viability" refers to an organization's probability of adapting appropriately to unknown (and often unknowable) changes in social conditions, particular those conditions associated with cultural diversity. The covid restrictions created exactly such an unexpected change, so it became a natural test of the IVI's claim to predict future adaptability. Based on data from the IVI and attendant interviews, there does appear to be an association between the measured Intercultural viability of organizations and how they have dealt with diversity in the context of covid restrictions. Two notable differences between high-viability and low-viability organizations emerged from our observations so far.

OPENNESS TO LOGISTIC RE-CONFIGURATION

High-scoring organizations adapted logistically to the online environment more quickly. For instance, one high-scoring

organization immediately reorganized its regional groupings for the on-line environment. Before the pandemic, regional groups in that organization had depended on periodic meetings attended by traveling executives. When travel was restricted, the organization realized that the travel had been being used to adapt to a historical but not currently necessary configuration of regions, and so it changed them to ones that could be coordinated more easily online. Employees were largely pleased with the reconfiguration, even though it meant some of them had to acquire new sets of information.

Low-scoring organizations were slower to make such changes, tending to preserve pre-covid configurations and simply transfer them online. Employees in low-scoring organizations were more likely to complain about the inconvenience and inferiority of on-line vs in-person interaction and to anticipate getting 'back to normal'. For employees in the high-scoring organizations, complaints were milder and talk was more about the "new normal".

In this case, Intercultural viability seemed to be predicting the ease with which employees were able to accept changes in relational configuration. Low-scoring organizations seemed to lack the agility to reconfigure procedure-driven working relationships quickly. Employees of high-scoring organizations, on the other hand, seemed to almost relish the change; they were more likely to make statements such as "it gave us a chance to get to know people that we'd previously only had passing knowledge of" or "it is great to try out my skills in a new environment."

OPENNESS TO STATUS RE-CONFIGURATION

High-scoring organizations used the shift to on-line activity to flatten status, while low-scoring organizations were more likely to maintain traditional hierarchical relations in the virtual environment. For example, one high-scoring Divisional Director

responsible for several regions reduced his presence in regional meetings, even though it was actually easier for him to attend virtually. His rationale was that the employees could easily invite him if necessary, but since he knew that his presence had the unintended effect of making the group search for his approval, he figured that creativity would be served by his absence. He reported that his action seemed to have the intended effect.

Examples such as that of the Divisional Director are less frequent in low-scoring organizations. Like the resistance to logistic re-configuration, it seemed that those organizations were even more likely to stress hierarchical control, with the rationale that virtual working could easily be abused and needed to be supervised more carefully. When applied to teams who are expected to generate creative innovation, the exercise of enhanced surveillance is counterproductive.

Although members of neither high nor low-scoring organizations are likely to know it, intercultural research established long ago that cross-cultural tolerance is increased in relatively same-status contact conditions (Alport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Intercultural viability predicts that high-scoring organizations will have a kind of intuitive knowledge of this effect, and that they will therefore deemphasize authority to encourage similar-status contact among diverse employees. The result is at least more tolerance, and perhaps even more appreciation of cultural differences, which in turn increases the potential for creative innovation in the organization.
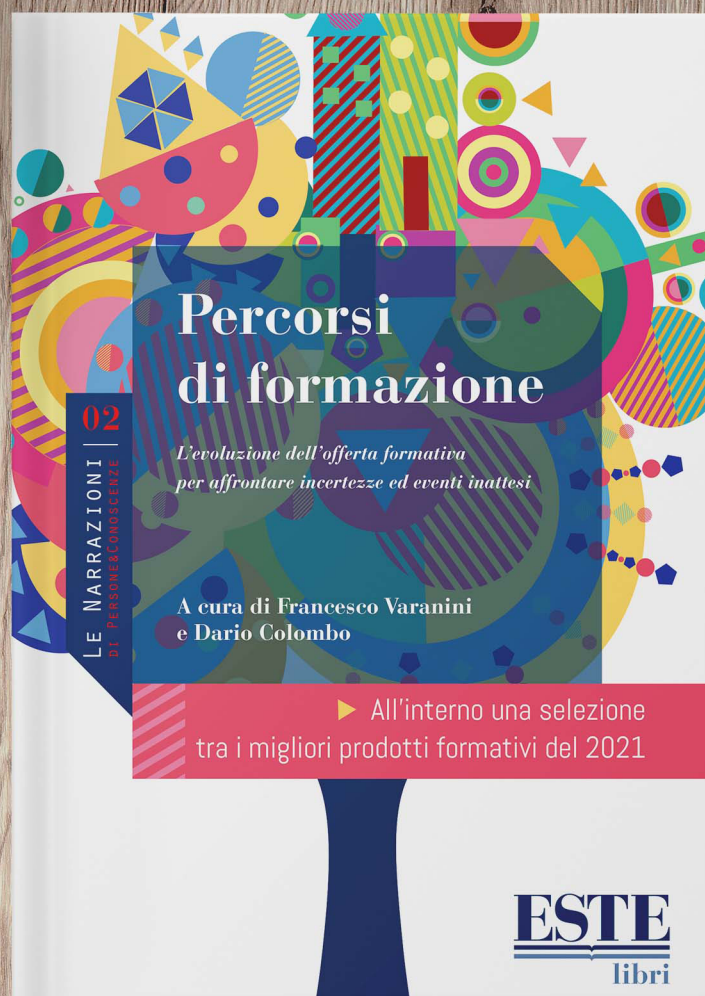

DIFFERENCES STIMULATE CREATIVE THINKING AND INNOVATION

The covid test of organizations is supporting something that we intercultural communication specialists have been saying for a long time: the key to deriving value from diversity depends on having a climate of respect for group differences (Bennett, 2016). Individual differences are, for the most part, already making the contribution they can to creative thinking and innovation. It is group difference that has been neglected or avoided, to the detriment of increased potential for creative innovation. High scores on the IVI predict that organizations will be more likely to use an unexpected opportunity to make structural changes that support cultural diversity.

A recent Future forum survey[1] of Black knowledge workers in the US provides some examples of these kind of structural changes (Subramanian & Gilbert, 2021). For instance, in addition to reducing status difference, on-line working reduces the unintentional exhibition of racism or sexism. Microaggressions are more likely to occur in casual face-to-face situations such as those routinely encountered in workplace interaction. The more intentional style of interaction usually encountered online is less fraught in this regard, and it was actually preferred to face-to-face interaction by those minority employees. Additionally, the Black workers reported that they were able to recover from unintentional slights more quickly and to feel more authentic without the face-to-face demands for constant adaptation to the dominant White culture. These factors are obvious contributions to a climate of respect for diversity, but are they outweighed by the loss of spontaneous innovative conversations?

The New York Times article *Do chance meetings at the office boost innovation? There's no evidence of it* suggests that face-to-face contact is an overrated contribution to workplace creativity (Miller, 2021). In fact, people in open offices meant to encourage such interaction actually avoid contact more than in closed offices (Bernstein & Waber, 2019). In my interviews with high-viability organizations, I often heard employees say that mechanisms such as breakout rooms allowed them easier and more focused opportunities to discuss creative ideas with colleagues. A caveat here is that my interviewees (and the Black employees in the Future Forum survey) were referring to on-line Smart working rather than simply remote working. The latter is often accompanied by more surveillance, which tends to stifle the use of online technology for spontaneous contact. On-line surveillance may also contribute to the already-existing perception of racial bias in what groups are subjected to greater amounts of supervision.

1 https://futureforum.com/2021/03/11/dismantling-the-office-moving-from-retrofit-to-redesign/

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In sum, the covid test has shown that some organizations have been able to use the unexpected event as an opportunity to make structural changes that enhance their potential for creative innovation. As predicted by high scores in Intercultural viability, those organizations exhibited an intuitive appreciation for changes that enhanced the climate of respect for cultural diversity – an important contributor to organizational innovation. Of course, this conclusion begs the question, "What can be done to improve the Intercultural viability of organizations, in anticipation of the next unexpected change?"

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE IS HOW WE RELATE TO EVENTS

Intercultural viability is not a competence possessed by either individuals or by organizations. Rather, it is a relationship. Specifically, it is the relationship between how individuals perceive themselves in terms of intercultural competence and how they perceive the intercultural competence of others in various workgroup contexts. Using the principles of quantum theory as described by Carlo Rovelli (2015; 2021) in *Seven Lessons of Physics, Helgoland,* and his other popular texts, the actuality of events is always a function of how we relate to them. So the question of "What can be done to improve" is answered by "Create the right kind of relationships." One part of the Intercultural viability relationship is how individuals relate to their own competence – their self-reflexive consciousness. Individual competence by itself does not generate viability. Rather, it is the ability of individuals to consciously adapt their competence in new situations that makes the difference. In organizations, that means that individuals must know how to relate to workgroups and the larger organization in terms of their competence. While this ability can be developed, it generally is not part of most leadership or employeeship training programs.

The other part of the Intercultural viability relationship is the group. Groups are more than the sum of their members' competence, as we know from observing synergy in highly functioning groups or entropy in dysfunctional groups. Standard group dynamic theory tells us that more cohesive groups are likely to be more functional. The cohesiveness of a group could be considered a form of coherence. Coherence is the phenomenon that allows every point of a holographic image to represent the whole image – in quantum theory terms, it means that individuals and groups are *entwined*. It is this underlying coherence (at least in terms of intercultural competence) and entwinement that makes organizations viable in changing social conditions. Organizations can facilitate this kind of coherence in individuals and groups, but they usually don't. Perhaps the main lesson of the covid test is that they should.

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