



37 Elm Street, Westfield, NJ 07090
Tel: 908.769.9282 | Fax: 908.561.3422
www.corptalkonline.com

Excerpted from Hamlet Nm. 24, January 2001 – translated by Paolo Pianigiani - copyright 2001

DIFFERENCE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

By Maria Seddio

“Thus the task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen,
but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees.”
Schopenhauer

“Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them.”
Vygotsky

“News of a difference... the technical term “information” may be succinctly defined as *any difference which makes a difference in some later event.*”
Bateson

“The most high powered lens I’ve discovered is variation...
the idea that the message ain’t in the mean, the mode or the median
– its in the differences that occur throughout a population.”
Tom Peters

“May you live in interesting times.” So goes the ancient Chinese mixed blessing. These are, no doubt, interesting times for organizations and the people who create and sustain them. Technology and the resultant global economy have skewed the marketplace and overturned many of the traditional power structures. Uncertainty, contradiction and paradox reign. Huge multinationals are taking over, building near-monopolies to dominate their industries. At the same time, small upstart companies are taking command, revolutionizing the way we do business and threatening the old guard with obsolescence. All bets are off. What worked yesterday is today’s prescription for failure. It is happening that fast. Fortunes made, fortunes lost – the closing tallies of the New York Stock Exchange and Nasdaq determine the winners and losers on a daily basis. Fluid, fast, ever changing, it is hard to make meaning of this new and quixotic world of work. We scramble for new definitions, changing our metaphors to reflect new paradigms. No longer a well-oiled and efficient piece of machinery, dependable, incremental, capable of being taken apart, analyzed and understood – business today is biology, organic, exponential, alive and unpredictable. In this environment one size does not fit all and there is no single strategy that assures success. Guts, intuition and know-how are key. “Best guess” and superior execution are the orders of the day. More than ever before, it is the speed with which we are able to perceive and respond to changes in our environment (i.e. in our organizations, industries, world economies) that will determine the long-term viability of our careers and our businesses. These ongoing and often complex calibrations require a new level of organizational analysis and understanding. They are predicated on our ability to recognize and respond to change pro-actively. The conduit for change is conversation. All information is constructed and disseminated through conversations, both formal and informal. They occur in the boardrooms, offices, hallways and elevators of every organization. Printed documents are a result of discussions and decisions that are made when people communicate “in conversation” with each other.

In a certain sense, we can say that any business is a series of conversations that take place over time – that the business “speaks itself into being.” It is precisely through these kinds of discussions that organizations involve themselves in a discovery process – an inquiry into what is unique, powerful and most alive about them. The central question that drives this inquiry is: *what is different about them?* How do they differentiate themselves in the marketplace? Difference becomes key – the “be all, end all” of organizational development. As Gregory Bateson

defined it -- "difference are the things that get put on the map." Positioning difference as the catalyst for all great conversations -- the essential element for any learning or change that needs to occur -- exalts its value in the business. It is through this lens -- the learning lens -- that people are most able to accept and value the differences in each other. We are nothing other than the sum total of our differences and yet we still struggle around many of the issues related to diversity. Differences of race, gender and ethnicity are differences that should not make a difference in workplace settings. They do not determine whether a person can do the job or make a contribution to the business. Too often they become the focus of our attention because of personal biases and historical prejudice. If we look to mitigate difference and build a platform of tolerance or politically acceptable behavior in our work - we end up negating that which is most alive in the organization and propagating a belief that difference should somehow be tamed or diluted. Over time, it becomes more and more difficult to value the differences in each other. Instead, we are inclined to ignore or avoid them. Conversation is an inherently creative process. Open dialogue, round table, role-play and improvisation are vehicles through which organizations can collectively explore and value difference. Conversation, after all is nothing other than a series of distinctions or differences that form meanings over time. These ongoing distinctions represent a virtual universe of difference, an unlimited resource from which the organization can draw its creativity and strength.

In the next 20 years we will be faced with an ever-increasing need to understand and value diversity in the workplace. Beyond the shifting demographics, the numbers that represent the people, it is in the living -- the being, seeing and doing -- that diversity is enacted in organizations. In order for the organization to be truly alive -- vital and responsive to the world in which it operates -- it requires that each of us bring our difference -- our full voice -- into the business. We can begin by opening up dialogue, encouraging honesty and making certain that "the talk" finds its way in our actions, one conversation at a time.