Diversity is Inefficient
by Ashindi Maxton

I can't remember the last time I talked to someone who didn't "value" diversity. In fact, among organizers and political types, racial diversity in particular is practically a fetish. There is good logic to that if you've got a basic grasp on demographics. It's about to be impossible to win anything in this country with coalitions of the monotone.

So, with demographic realities and righteousness on our side, we strive to build diverse movements and organizations. My sense - and tell me if I'm wrong - is that mostly we fail. While there are growing numbers of leaders from diverse backgrounds, I can use one hand (with fingers to spare) to count the organizations and issue-based coalitions that are *representatively* diverse, from their leadership to their base.

Reverend Lennox Yearwood of the Hip-Hop Caucus (quoted in a 2007 blog post by my friend Jen Ancona) described the problem this way:

> *When I speak at anti-war rallies the audience is usually all White, when I speak at immigration rallies the audience is usually all Brown… Global warming, usually White, police brutality, usually Black, and so on. The progressive movement is segregated, and race is the tripwire that prevents us from coming together. Not only do I find this to be very discouraging, it is self-defeating.*

I have a theory, actually a bunch of them, about how issues of culture, class, and education hinder building racially diverse coalitions. But other people have made whole careers out of enumerating those. A huge challenge is that these issues feel so out of any one person's locus of control. However, I'm beginning to believe there is a single challenge to diversity that is actually conquerable by any one of us. Something we can personally tackle if we just admit to the problem.

Diversity is inefficient.

At least, it is inefficient in the short run. In the long run, to repeat myself, we are not going to win anything anymore if we can't build racially inclusive coalitions and organizations. That said, here are just a couple ways that diversity takes time and energy:

1. The people who are already in our network tend to have a lot in common with us. Diversity requires us to go further out of our own networks to find new partners for our work or new hires for our organization and that takes time. It definitely takes more time than hiring and working with people we already know.
2. Once we have identified a diverse set of folks to work with, it takes more time and energy to work with them than it does to work with people who are more like us. We are likely to have different communication styles, knowledge bases and points of reference. These points of difference are actually an incredible strength, but in day to day practice they dramatically multiply the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings. Truth.

And then there is this - it turns out that diversity is not just inefficient, it is insufficient. Getting a diverse set of bodies into a room is not enough. We also have to find a way to hear out all the voices we've put in our pretty room and make them count for something. Inclusion = diversity + engagement. That is a time consuming equation.

The thing is, we shouldn't bother with diversity unless we plan to make the time to be inclusive. Because diversity without inclusion backfires. Almost always. Over and over again I've seen people with the best intentions of building racial bridges horrified to see chasms of racial mistrust forming instead. This is usually because they expected diversity alone to get the work done.

Building bridges takes time and focused effort. We have to be ready and willing to give everyone's voice equal weight, and share power across new alliances. Chasms, unfortunately, seem to form naturally.

I worked for a while with a group of civil rights leaders who frequently referred to the "chocolate chip model" of politics, where they were engaged by mostly white coalitions who were looking for diversity but not inclusion. Typically these groups would create a strategy and, only later, look to build out their diversity. These new diverse players were very welcome, as long as they don't express dissent from the rest of the group or tip any balance of power.

In the chocolate chip model, the goal is to check a diversity box. Inclusion requires us to make space for the whole agenda to shift once the needs of multiple groups are seriously considered. Engaging new people in a way that disrupts existing priorities makes things chaotic and messy, at least for a while. It is, initially, highly inefficient (so, by the way, is democracy).

Inclusion is also difficult because, as it turns out, we are programmed to form "in" and "out" groups. I remember reading a study in which they asked people to count the number of dots on a page. Some people over-counted the number of dots. Others under-counted the dots. When you got all those people in a room and labeled them all as "over-counters" or "under-counters," they formed measurable preferences for the people who were most "like" them. Under-counters, for example, would privilege other under-counters if given the chance.

Feel free to read this study to say that having an in-group preference doesn't (necessarily) mean you're racist (or sexist, or homophobic, or religiously biased). Forming an in-group preference in any setting is a part of a natural instinct humans have to form tribes.

We can also read this study to better understand how our natural inclination to relate in-group may be constantly working against our goals for diversity and inclusion. We should expect a bit of a swim upstream to get outside of our self-defined in-groups (whatever they may be).

Here is an example of how the our tendency to relate most easily to people in our in-group can play out in real life. Imagine a meeting in which everyone in the room has agreed to messaging for a campaign targeting primarily low-income African Americans, except for the one African-American at the table. As irrational as it might sound to write off the input of the person most likely to relate to the core audience, it happens all the time if that person is in the minority inside that room. Further, if that person expresses dissent, they may well end up being being labeled as personally difficult to work with, especially if they express any frustration in addition to a difference of opinion. If this scenario sounds improbable to you, I would like to speak personally from my experience as a black woman. It happens. All. The. Time.

Majority rule will always be more expedient. And some other goal (let's say health care or climate change, or just the next report or event that's due) is almost always going to feel more pressing than taking the time to meaningfully include all of the voices in the room.

If we're going to get there, we have to value inclusion so highly that it becomes its own objective. That doesn't mean that all other work stops so we can talk full-time about our differences. The whole point is for us to be able to effect change together. However, we also have to recognize all that we gain by giving inclusion the time and energy it demands. We have to believe that it is actually more efficient to build bridges than to stand idly by as chasms form and widen.

In the spirit of being a generation of bridge-builders, I'd like to make a few concrete suggestions for how any of us can start right now treating inclusion as a part of our purpose rather than a diversion:

- **Acknowledge that, in the short run, diversity and inclusion can feel inefficient.** Then explicitly decide that you value them enough to create time to make them happen. As one example, this might mean longer processes for decision-making and hiring to tap into new networks and incorporate different viewpoints.
- **Make time for difficult conversations about difference and do not over-personalize them.** Take risks in beginning conversations about difference and expect that we may have to confront distrust for reasons that may or may not have anything to do with us. Don't take it too personally. These conversations especially take time and we can make them work us by being genuinely open and reflective and bringing a ton of generosity to them. Talking about difference is hard for almost everyone. We need practice to do it well.
- **Make space for ideas that may not resonate for you at first.** We lose more good thinking than we know by shutting out a train of thought that may simply be out of our own comfort zone. Different life experiences truly do shape different points of view. This can be an asset if we let it be.
- **Hone your awareness of in-group preference, particularly if you are in a position of power.** Is it possible that you are including and excluding people based on how comfortable they make you feel as opposed to the value they are adding?
- **Read.** We can't learn everything from a book, but we also can't always expect others to shoulder the burden of educating us. Literature can do a lot to hone our sensibilities and make sure we are not imposing on others to educate us. Relatively current biographies of people from different backgrounds, or books specifically about racial difference like "[Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria](#)?" might be a good start.
- **Use this simple inclusion metric.** If you want to create an inclusive group process, ask yourself: how many meetings did we have before we included diverse voices in your process? If you are being inclusive, the closer you can get to 0, the better.
- **Intentionally build a critical mass of diverse voices.** If one person in the room has a significantly different background than others, remember how easy it can be to marginalize their point of view - especially if it varies from what everyone else is saying. The more diversity there is in the room, the more comfortable people are likely to feel expressing a different point of view and believing they are likely to be heard.
- **Create virtuous cycles by activating networks of people from diverse communities.** We naturally tend to have networks of others who are a lot like us. People from diverse communities will gravitate to inclusive organizations or coalitions, bringing their networks to bear along with them. As this happens, the

work of building an inclusive movement or organization can become easier over time.

These are just a few suggestions. The one indispensable strategy is to identify actions that build diversity and inclusion that are within your personal control. Then commit to doing those things. Inefficiency be damned.