

## **Diversity Elephants and Giraffes? Building a House of Diversity: Book Critique**

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This book critique of *Building a House for Diversity: A Fable about a Giraffe and an Elephant Offers New Strategies for Today's Workforce* was completed in response to an ongoing need to make relevant application of published writing about diversity. The book was written by R. R. Thomas and M. I. Woodruff. The purpose of the book is to provide readers a greater understanding of diversity and the factors that contribute to organizations and individuals responses to diversity, and to increase the reader's diversity management skills. The fable includes giraffes and elephants as the main characters to illustrate common dilemmas that arise when diverse groups come together. Short vignettes consisting of personal interviews with individuals who are characterized as either giraffes or elephants are used to create connections with the reader. This work is a continuation of previous books related to diversity, race, and workforce issues.

Keywords: diversity, communication, competence, workplace

### **Introduction**

The book begins with the story of a giraffe who builds a new home well suited for a giraffe and family. The giraffe invites over an elephant friend and they quickly learn the house that was well suited for the giraffe is not very accommodating for the elephant. An exchange of words ensues and the giraffe being the owner of the house offers solutions to the elephant including losing weight, taking fitness classes, and changing so he can continue to visit him in his new house. These comments do not sit well with the elephant. Through-out the book, the authors use the giraffes to represent individuals who are the owners of the house, the majority, or organization leaders. The elephants symbolize the diverse individuals representing the minority. The conflicts in the story are consistent with situations that occur in the workplace. The authors assign the responsibility of diversity management to the giraffes as well as the elephants. Thomas and Woodruff (1999) reinforce the belief that "diversity management begins and ends with individuals. It begins with each of us accepting our responsibility as actors in the diversity scenario, and it ends with our acquiring certain specific skills and achieving a level of maturity in our thinking and actions about diversity" (p. 9). This statement embodies the purpose of the work. The authors include interviews with high giraffes in action, elephants in action, and giraffes in action.

The interviews provide unique insight into the attitudes, stereotypes, practices, and beliefs about diversity in our organizations today. The characters are faced with dilemmas that challenge their diversity maturity. Some characters conform to organizational expectations or assimilate; others respond with anger and frustration, become uncompromising, others are what the authors describe as pioneers who seek to lead the diversity efforts at their organizations. The authors provide what is described as a diversity effectiveness analysis of each interview and provide recommendations for the individual's next course of action. The analysis includes how the individual rate as an effective diversity respondent (EDR). Thomas and Woodruff (1999) define an EDR as someone who "engages in the struggle, even though it is occasionally uncomfortable, because they want to respond to diversity consistently in ways that help to achieve their personal goals and also the organization's objectives" (p. 11). The diversity effectiveness analysis provides the reader a model to consistently evaluate and compare these situations.

As mentioned, the book includes interviews describing the responses individuals had to specific situations and how their responses impacted the outcomes and included an EDR rating as well as a diversity effectiveness analysis for each. All of the interviews are important and provide examples to reinforce the over-lying themes of the book. The following paragraphs will provide a review of selected character interviews and the connection to the overall themes of the book.

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## **High Giraffes**

Phil Jackson is a National Basketball Association coach who is well known for his success with the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers. Jackson was hired to coach a team that had tremendous talent but not the intangible skills needed to win. The authors tie Jackson's success back to his diversity maturity and his ability to incorporate a belief system in the organization. The authors illustrate how Jackson encouraged his team to believe in a common vision through his effort to help Michael Jordan (a prolific scorer at the time) to adjust his game to allow other team members of the team to become scorers. Jackson developed a system that included a mission and a vision for the team rooted in his Zen Buddhist beliefs. The authors use Jackson's adding Dennis Rodman to the team as evidence of Jackson's ability and willingness to adapt to diverse individuals. Many would agree Rodman was the most unique, outrageous, and disruptive player in the league. Jackson and the team focused on what they needed from Rodman, which was rebounding and defense. Jackson, Jordan, and Scotty Pippin did not attempt to change Rodman but were tolerant of the diversity tension he created. With Rodman, the team continued to win NBA Championships. Jackson left the Bulls and began coaching the Los Angeles Lakers. The situation there was similar. The Lakers had Kobe Bryant who at the time was a prolific scorer. As he did in Chicago, Jackson applied his vision, focus, and diversity tolerance to the team, and the Lakers were successful, winning numerous NBA championships. Along the way, Jackson and the team's diversity tolerance was tested several times as the Lakers added superstars like Ron Arest and several other challenging athletes.

In addition to the Jackson story, the authors describe another high giraffe success story. This character, John Smith, describes his journey to success in a manufacturing plant in Michigan. Like Jackson, Smith was given a talented but very diverse team and was able to achieve success. The success of Jackson and Smith is contributed to their ability to communicate a clear mission and vision to their team, distribute power, and integrate diverse workers. (Thomas & Woodruff, 1999 p. 54).

## **Angry Elephants**

The authors include four interviews with individuals described as elephants: Ray a Mexican-American male; Carol an Asian-American female; Debra an African-American female and Mark a young performance driven African-American male. Each

story represents a facet of diversity that is evident in our work place.

Ray and Carol have been successful in their careers. Both have adopted an approach to diversity issues by conforming to the norms of their organizations. Both have attempted to avoid diversity conflicts and tension. Ray is a very successful leader in a family-owned store. He worked his way from an entry-level position to supervisory roles in the company. Ray contributes his success totally to his efforts and not due to affirmative action attempts by management to promote diversity. Ray's unwillingness to concede that some of his success was due to inclusion attempts by management is evidence of his desire to conform to the organization norms and not create any diversity tension. Carol is very successful but due to her Asian culture, she has been described as quiet, and her youthful appearance has made it difficult for co-workers to take her seriously. Carol does not feel comfortable speaking up for herself and calling attention to her accomplishments. Ray and Carol's response has been to conform to the expected behavior and not create any issues. To continue to grow in their organizations both Ray and Carol will need to develop ways to directly address their diversity issues.

Debra and Mark are described as angry elephants who feel they were placed in compromising positions by their organizations. Debra has worked for her organization successfully for fourteen years. Recently the company restructured and Debra was reassigned. The reassignment reduced her power in the organization and changed her duties. Debra reports having difficulty connecting with her team members and concludes the problem is due to her being a black female. Debra is frustrated and angry at the situation but takes little responsibility for her responses. Debra beliefs are shaped by her mother and grandmother, who owned her own business because she did not want to work for white people. Debra harbors these underling sentiments which are making her transition difficult.

Mark a new-comer to his company is a top performer who focuses heavily on sales numbers and achieving high success. Mark has won several awards for his efforts and seeks to move up in the company. Mark's most recent attempt to obtain a new position failed, and he was passed over for a promotion by a white female with less experience. She developed relationships with others in the organization and was a better networker than Mark. Mark was unaware of the unwritten organization rules that success is not based solely on your performance - you must work on fostering relationships with other departments.

Mark feels betrayed by the organization and is considering leaving the company.

### **Diversity and Communication**

Throughout the book, the authors emphasize the importance of communication so that individuals understand the organization's requirements and diversity expectations. In the situations described in the book, when elephants or subordinates experienced difficulties, communication was non-existent or a hit-and-miss informal process. Thomas and Woodruff (1999) state "managers are simply poor communicators, and to make matters worse, are at a complete loss with people who are different from themselves" (p. 143). The authors put the responsibility of communication on the elephants. This is true; everyone is ultimately responsible for his or her own professional development. This same expectation should be imposed when evaluating managers and organizational leaders. Many say we need profound newly developed approaches to managing diversity; however, one of the fundamental components to diversity management is developing communication skills and creating formal processes to communicate organization expectations. The examples provided in the book describe individuals having to search for and learn organization requirements. Few describe undergoing extensive training or discussions on diversity with managers or organization leaders. Mark, the young sales-man, had the skills, motivation, and ability to progress in the company. However, he was not informed of the organization's expectations for building relationships with other departments in the organization. While Mark admits to seeing potential signs that he needed to increase his efforts to establish relationships, this requirement was not explicitly communicated. To remain competitive, organizations cannot leave this discussion to chance. Organizations must have clearly defined processes to create high levels of diversity maturity.

### **Diversity Competence**

The authors point to a sobering conclusion about the level of diversity competence among managers and leaders. Thomas and Woodruff (1999) reinforce the fact that leaders "don't understand diversity and their pioneering status, they don't appreciate the complexity and challenge of the situation. As a result, they don't realize they need education, training, and development (p. 194). This statement is at the heart of the diversity issue. Organization leaders have not developed the high level of diversity maturity described in this book. Most have

backgrounds and experiences nothing like the individuals carrying out the daily organizational tasks. Leaders expect their direct reports to assimilate to their approach. Newly hired direct reports spend their first few months figuring out how the boss wants things done. Only after a level of confidence and trust is built does the individual start providing input. However, the individual has gone through a process of conforming to the leader's expectations and his or her diverse views and approaches have been stifled. Most leaders seem content; they have been successful and will continue to be successful using their current methods. Having discussions about diversity will create issues that they lack the experience and knowledge to address. Organization leaders leave diversity to the human resources department: Hiring committees are required to interview a select number of diverse candidates, and they simply adhere to the policy and do little else to push the human resources department to seek a diverse candidate pool. Diversity in most organizations is very much based on inclusion. Diversity by inclusion is about counting and reporting, so we have evidence that efforts are being made with only minimal consideration of the outcomes. (Thomas & Woodruff, 1999, p. 16) Organization leaders do not have an understanding on what it takes to create a culture that embraces diversity, and most are unwilling to put forth the effort to increase their knowledge and skill. The authors would describe these organizations as having a low level of diversity maturity and describes their efforts as Tokenism. (Thomas & Woodruff, 1999, pp. 220-221) True change requires a move away from compliance-based diversity to truly developing leaders, managers and employees who are willing to put effort into understanding diversity and talking about it.

### **Underlying Diversity Issues**

Several underlying diversity issues warrant further discussion. The hierarchy in the giraffe world is built on membership being a sign of status. Many up-and-coming giraffes or professionals see success as being linked to the "in" crowd and conforming to the lead giraffe's expectations. Individuals hold the head giraffes in high regard and respect their opinions. Because they possess "an affinity with the head giraffe and enjoy membership in the dominate insider group, they can see themselves as part of the organizational family and may take for granted that they understand its workings. Giraffes who think in these ways see little need to gather data on the head giraffe's and organization's requirements (Thomas & Woodruff, 1999, p. 192). This phenomenon is one of the most concerning issues impacting not only

organizations but our society. Many individuals look to the world's anointed head giraffes to dictate how they should think about certain issues. Rather than look at issues based on the merits, they simply turn on their preferred news outlet, talk show, or podcast to find out how they should respond. Gathering additional data or listening to other opinions is not included in the process to arrive at an informed decision. They simply take the words for truth and allow this to shape their opinions. While this process is simple, it has dangerous implications. During a town meeting for the 2008 presidential election a woman told John McCain she had read about Obama and could not trust him because he was an Arab. McCain seemed taken aback by how misinformed the woman was and proceeded to explain that Obama was not an Arab and only an American that he had a disagreement with on how to run the country (FiReArNoK, 2008). Many non-informed individuals rely on leaders, news reports, or talk show hosts to provide guidance on how to respond to issues of diversity, public policy, and personal beliefs. Public leaders freely express their opinions and beliefs and often have public and hidden agendas. Organizational leaders have a higher sense of responsibility to provide subordinates a clear understanding of why and how the organization does business. Leaders should invite discussions when individuals have questions about the company's expectations or company philosophy. These questions should be viewed as opportunities to clear up any miscommunications and to hear suggestions that may improve the current approach.

### Conclusion

In summary, the book provides an in-depth look into diversity and provides insight for self-improvement for individuals and organizations. The authors' use of the elephants and giraffes metaphor to keep the story moving was effective. Some may find the references too simplistic and distracting but the

authors do a good job weaving the story into real world application. The utilization of the character interviews provides anecdotal accounts that offer opportunities for the reader to personally connect to the book. The reader is challenged by pre- and post-assessment, open-ended questions, and themes to challenge current diversity attitudes. Many business-minded individuals dismiss diversity and other soft skills because they do not include real world applications. The authors attempt to address this issue through-out the book.

Thomas and Woodruff (1999) encourage participants or businesses that are faced with diversity to identify which differences are potentially of great value, conditionally acceptable and unconditionally not acceptable. These distinctions are made based on how the differences will affect the business mission and requirements (p. 26). Businesses would not be expected to support differences that are described as unconditionally not acceptable, which are detrimental to the well-being of the business mission. Using these approaches decreases the anxiety of managing diversity. Additionally, the authors concede everyone will not develop close relationships as a result of the authors' work. Individuals will, however, develop the skills to understand the diversity mixtures to respond in a manner that helps them achieve their personal goals and be in line with the organization's mission and goals.

### References

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