

# The Glass Ceiling Is the Floor My Boss Walks On

## *Leadership Challenges in Managing Diversity*

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This article analyzes layers of meaning that are embedded in the concept of diversity in a financial institution. It examines the discourses about diversity that emerged over 2½ years, during which a CEO was intentionally trying to change his organization's cultural norms and to become more sensitive to "valuing people." By tracking the conversational patterns between the CEO and the organizational "discourse communities," this research highlights the processes by which meaning gets ascribed to the concept of organizational diversity and its impact on organizational structures and culture across time.

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Over the past 20 years, the literature on organizational change has explored the topic of organizational diversity. Discussions about diversity have ranged from learning to appreciate individual style differences to understanding international multicultural perspectives (Adler, 1991; Copeland & Griggs, 1985; Limaye, 1994; Smith & Berg, 1997). Diversity has also been written about in the context of organizational mergers and the problems that arise from bringing two or more disparate cultures together

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(Jackson, 1992; Marks & Mirvis, 1998). Most frequently, however, diversity refers to including and managing people in the workforce who have traditionally been marginalized because of their race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and/or disability (Cox, 1993; Cross, 2000; Ferdman, 1992; Loden & Rosener, 1991; Thomas, 2001; Thomas & Ely, 1996; Zane, 1997). There also has been discussion about the impact of diversity on the bottom line as well as the economic and legal consequences for failing to hire, professionally develop, and promote white women and people of color (Johnson & Packer, 1987). Recently, the focus has been on diversity as a strategic issue that impacts both organizational performance and environmental positioning within an increasingly global market (Cross, 2000; Jackson, 1992; Johnson & Packer, 1987; Loden & Rosener, 1991; Thomas & Ely, 1996).

While theories on organizational change have focused on the benefits of having a diverse workforce (Cox, 1993; Cross, 2000; Katz & Miller, 1986; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Thomas, 2001; Thomas & Ely, 1996), very little has been written about the processes by which meaning gets ascribed to the concept of organizational diversity. Although the organizational literature provides a beginning framework for understanding the role of language in creating organizational change (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995; Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood, 1990; Zak, 1994), there are few longitudinal studies focused on the role that both leadership and organizational groups play in co-constructing the meaning of diversity for the system as a whole (Barrett et al., 1995; Bartunek & Moch, 1992). Nor has previous research indicated how changes in the way diversity is discussed have impacted organizational structures and culture across time.

This article describes how a CEO of a large financial institution in the Northeast, who had publicly vowed to have his bank become more diverse, communicated and actualized his and the organization's commitment to diversity as part of a larger culture change process. While the change was initially formulated and introduced at the executive level, many group and intergroup dynamics were stirred at the middle and lower levels of the organization. With each articulation of the CEO's vision, new forums for discussing organizational policies, practices, and cultural norms were created. Hence, conversations across race and gender lines and between managers and nonexempt employees, once viewed as taboo, came to be experienced as legitimate. In the process, new discourse communities were created. A discourse community is a set of organizational and/or identity groups (Alderfer & Thomas, 1987) coming together to discuss, across established group boundaries, their experiences of differences. In a discourse community, the character of the conversation is mingled with the group and organization dynamics folded into the conversations.

As these exchanges occurred, diversity ceased to be construed by the organization as a whole in terms of personality difference and was spoken about in terms of race and gender and systemic change. Through the interaction of the CEO and several discourse communities, the meaning of diversity to the organization as a whole was renegotiated. This altered meaning gave rise to a range of new managerial actions and, subsequently, to new conversations about diversity.

## METHOD

The materials discussed in this article are drawn from multiple sources of data collected at Eastern Bank<sup>1</sup> over a 2½ year period. Along with a number of other graduate students, I was a member of an action-research team at the University of Pennsylvania that was studying different aspects of the bank's culture change process. My focus was on the various interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational conversations at Eastern Bank about the theme of diversity. Informed by intergroup relations (Alderfer, 1977, 1986; Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Berg & Smith, 1985; Smith, 1982) and feminist theories (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Fine & Weis, 1995; Harding, 1987; Irigaray, 1993; Lather, 1986), both clinical and qualitative research methods (Agar, 1980; Berg & Smith, 1985; Kidder & Judd, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1984) were used to uncover multiple systems of meaning generated within Eastern Bank on the issue of organizational diversity.

Data were collected from a wide range of sources that included archival materials, focus groups, observations of group meetings and workshop interactions, and both in-depth and short interviews of individuals in the organization (see Appendix 1 for a summary of methods and sources of data tapped within each method). The data gathered by other members of the action-research team, along with the in-depth exchanges with the other consultants who worked at Eastern Bank but who held very different perspectives than ours, were used to triangulate the data presented here (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In addition, as a way to gain perspective on how my group memberships as a white Jewish woman in her mid-30s from an elite academic institution influenced and informed my work (Berg & Smith, 1985; Fine & Weis, 1995), I recorded field notes that reported my observations, my ongoing analysis, and my own experiences of differences at the bank. The action-research team also reflected on our experiences and identified parallel processes at work (Berg & Smith, 1985; Smith, Simmons, & Thames, 1989; Smith & Zane, 1999).

Data analysis was an iterative process based on grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). Discrete components of the data were analyzed to understand the themes/issues/categories/dilemmas around particular events and periodically were framed by the whole data set to see how the meaning fit with what was occurring in the larger context (Mischler, 1979).<sup>2</sup>

## SETTING THE FRAME

Founded in 1876, Eastern Bank initially served "large farmers, merchants, and city aristocrats" but opened its door in the early 1900s to a wider portion of the population. With its long-standing northeastern aristocratic roots, the bank sported a paternalistic culture of hardworking (white) "gentlemen" whose role was to preserve the bank's conservative and highly profitable legacy. However, by the mid 1970s, the bank had come to include white women and people of color in its burgeoning ranks. Most of these employees occupied lower levels, and all were expected to fit into the established bureaucratic culture.

Like many of its financial competitors in the 1960s and 1970s, Eastern was able to balance growth with wide margins of security. However, with the loss of regulatory protection in the early 1980s, the S. & L. crisis, real estate problems, and a slowing economy, Eastern became vulnerable to the turbulent forces that permeated the U.S. marketplace. While the bank began to see itself as part of an “industry under siege,” it continued to act cautiously and followed a set of guiding principles grounded in a low-risk, high-performance orientation. Because it remained financially solvent through the 1980s, Eastern managed to acquire some of its competitors as the era of consolidation took hold.

Along with the expansion that took place at Eastern in the late 1980s, there was a change in leadership. In 1988, Paul Forelli, the senior economist at the bank, was chosen as the CEO over several other men being groomed for the position. This was an important decision on the part of the board, for it signaled a break with some of Eastern’s traditions. The new CEO did not fit the prototype of an Eastern senior officer with an Ivy League education and a “white Anglo-Saxon Protestant” (WASP) identity, who had grown up in the Northeast and came from a strong banking heritage. Forelli was from an Italian, Catholic, working-class neighborhood in the south side of Detroit. He had spent many years as a construction worker and had put himself through college and graduate school. Although Forelli learned to fit into the elite culture of the banking community, he was not of it, and he understood the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, fairness, and partiality.

Forelli, who elected to be known throughout the organization as “Paul,” announced in the early 1990s at an annual address to the corporation’s officers his vision of becoming a hundred-billion-dollar asset bank, a proposal that assumed that Eastern would continue to acquire others rather than be bought. Intertwined with his stated desire for profitability was an unusual set of managerial beliefs that linked Eastern’s “competitive edge” with the development of the “people” side of the organization. He described his goal of having the bank be an “excellent” organization, one that could “manage the numbers” well, use cutting-edge technology, and also create a more humanistic, family-, and people-oriented organization. A cornerstone of Paul’s vision was “valuing diversity,” honoring individual differences, and encouraging a breadth of perspectives in an environment of respect. At the time of his promotion, he saw employee morale as low and attributed this dissatisfaction to an insensitive organizational culture. Paul decided to initiate a culture change program, designed to make Eastern more hospitable to those who had been historically disadvantaged.

During the next 2 years, his understanding of two concepts, culture and diversity, altered significantly. By tracking and analyzing Paul’s public messages, and by examining how the various groups in Eastern talked about diversity, it was possible to identify a core element in the culture change process rarely discussed in the literature on diversity: For race and gender relations to change in an organization, leaders as well as the relevant organizational and identity groups need to co-construct a common understanding of what they mean when they are talking about “diversity.”

At the beginning, “diversity” meant many different things to different people at Eastern. They traveled a tumultuous path as they co-created a common, collective understanding of this concept. The “story” that follows is divided into three phases

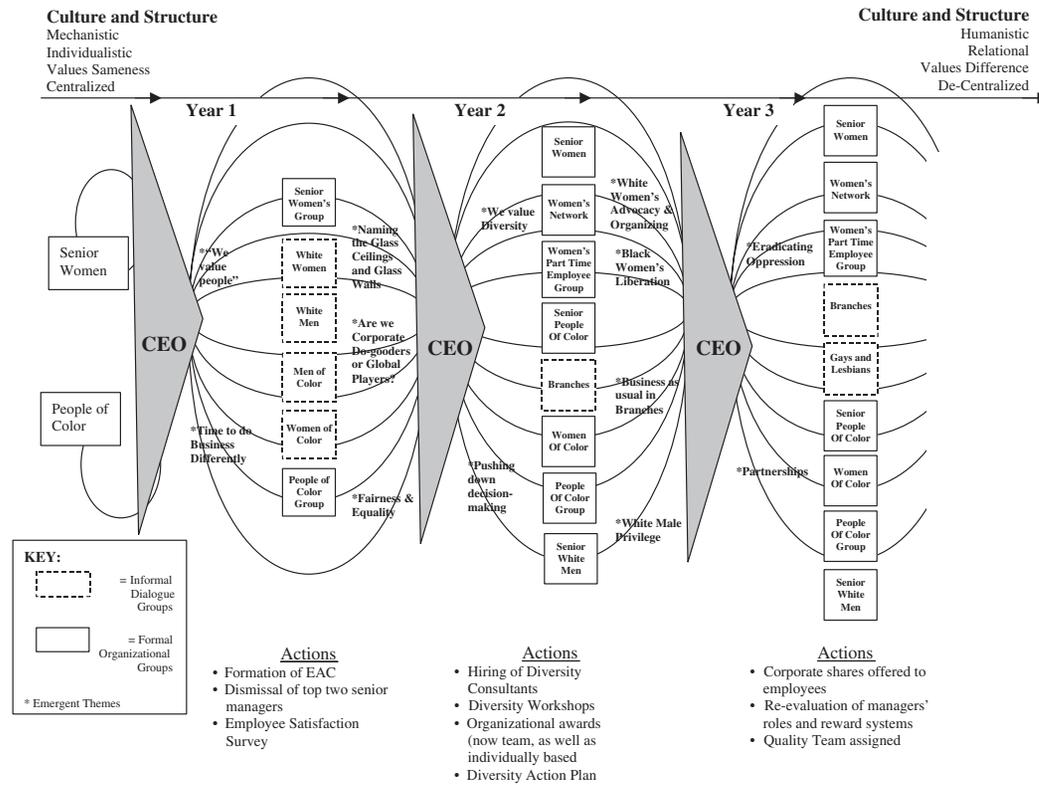


FIGURE 1: Transformations in Dialogue: Changes in Diversity, Structure, and Culture

which, taken together, describe the CEO's evolving framework for steering his organization through the first 2½ years in a multi-year, organizational, culture change process that had "diversity" as a critical thread. The first two phases each represent a 12-month time frame (Year 1 and Year 2). They include the themes introduced by the CEO at each of his annual meetings as well as the conversations that followed within and among a number of organizational and identity groups. The third phase focuses solely upon the CEO's messages in the beginning of Year 3. Figure 1 provides an overall picture of the dynamics discussed in this article. It depicts (a) the evolving dialogue between the CEO (the shaded triangles) and various groups (both officially sanctioned groups as reflected by the solid-line boxes versus temporary, informal groups shown by the dotted-line boxes); (b) the emergence of newly organized official groups over time (note the increasing number of solid-line boxes); (c) the thematic changes in conversations about diversity, structure, and culture that were catalyzed by the CEO-group interactions (identified by the asterisks within each phase) and the introduction of new actions (listed at the bottom under each phase of interaction); and (d) the changes in cultural norms as the organization evolved from a bureaucratic/mechanistic system to a more fluid, humanistic one (reflected in the line at the top of the page).

**Phase I: "We Value People" and "It's Time to Do Business Differently" (Year 1)**

*Communicating the vision.* In his annual talk to his corporate managers, CEO Paul Forelli set out to inspire a "cultural transformation" within the organization that "will make Eastern a superior institution and will make great business sense as well." He sought to replace interpersonal alienation within the organization with familial connections based on "respect, courtesy, and caring" without regard to race, gender, or position. As he said in his speech, "Whether they work at one of our banks or at the holding company, man or woman, black or white, whether staff or line—everyone will be well treated."

Blaming the human resources (HR) department as well as himself for failing to be more "people-sensitive," he wanted to create a work environment where employees could develop both personally and professionally and be fully and fairly recognized for their contributions. Paul thought that by altering interpersonal norms, nurturing individual employees' professional growth, rewarding positive work, and emphasizing equality among individuals that the "diversity problem" in his organization would be fixed. He described a "company built around teamwork and caring" that would serve as a model for the community as well as other businesses. The resulting atmosphere would "radiate out" to customers and shareholders, enabling Eastern to be distinguished from its competitors, thus maintaining its dominant position within the competitive, financial marketplace. As he finished his talk, he challenged his audience to go out and actualize his vision.

The CEO's initial vision for an "organizational transformation" was to change the interpersonal relations. However, when his message was heard, there was much confusion about the level and scope of the change in power relations he actually intended to produce. While Paul talked about wanting to have a "diverse workforce," he offered an

individually driven vision for change. He assumed that if each person were to treat all others with respect and kindness, interpersonal and organizational conflicts would dissipate (Morrison, 1992). He focused solely on changing individual attitudes and behaviors, ignoring entirely the centrality of group and intergroup dynamics, institutional oppression, and the long-standing impact of racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice. Paul ignored the fact that people had differing access to resources and decision making. And he did not address how organizational members were to create a climate of respect, given that the power, resources, and decision-making authority was concentrated almost exclusively in the hands of the white, senior men.

He also spoke of wanting Eastern to feel like a family. This sent shock waves through Eastern. People came from families of many different kinds, functional and dysfunctional, nuclear and clan, single-parent and "intact" families, and so on. No one was sure what Paul meant when he said he wanted the organization to "function like a family," or what kind of "family" he was talking about. In addition, some wondered if his use of the metaphor of the family as a unifying symbol was designed to camouflage the ongoing domination of bureaucratic norms (see Fox, 1975).

Despite these limitations in his framing of diversity, the CEO did put into motion several personnel and structural changes that began to impact the overall organizational climate during Year 1. His speech opened up the conversation about the organization's culture and created a space for new organizational actions. Two moves on Paul's part caught everyone's attention, created more open dialogue, and made it possible for new behaviors to emerge.

First, he fired the number-two and number-three men in the hierarchy. Both were known as oppressive autocrats. This signaled that this old style of management would no longer be rewarded and/or tolerated. This led people to believe that the CEO was serious.

Second, he created an ad hoc group called Eastern's Action Committee (EAC) to implement his vision. This was a powerful gesture and signaled that the change initiative was not being entrusted to the HR director and his department, which was viewed as the old guard who could undermine it. Although the EAC was primarily composed of senior managers, its members represented a broader range of organizational functions and included several white women and numerous people of color. That was a huge change for Eastern.

The EAC started by doing a few key things. It articulated a set of values designed to embody the CEO's new vision. Then, it initiated the company's first-ever Employee Satisfaction Survey, not only to find out what all employees thought but also to create a baseline for tracking progress as the organization pursued its change agenda. In addition, the EAC articulated six "Key Values" focused on people, performance, teamwork, diversity, communication, and integrity. Their "diversity" value was: We will actively promote an atmosphere of mutual respect for each other's differences, recognizing that our diversity creates a breadth of perspectives that strengthens our organization.

While this statement about diversity reflected Paul's individualistic orientation, it also incorporated an acknowledgement that differences were important and that they needed to move beyond a "color-blind" approach to the issue.

As they began to develop the Employee Satisfaction Survey, they conducted focus groups, which represented the whole workforce. This enabled people at all levels of the organization and across race and gender groups to begin talking for the first time about concerns related to the quality of their work lives.

During the debates about values and what should be included in the survey, white women and people of color challenged Paul's view of what diversity meant and highlighted some of the institutional structures and procedures that made working at Eastern extremely hard for anyone who was not a white male. They highlighted themes of exclusion, denigration, glass ceilings, and glass walls. These discussions made visible the double binds that white women and people of color experienced in regards to recruitment, career development, and promotions. As one African American man said bitterly, "Although it is assumed that we will want to play on the basketball team, we aren't asked out to lunch with the politically attuned . . . we're clearly not on the grapevine."

While white women and people of color felt burdened by the discriminatory practices that prohibited them from moving up in the ranks, their focus at this time in the organization's history centered less on transforming the bureaucracy to accept and/or appreciate their group memberships and more on the removal of obstacles that would enable individuals, regardless of race and gender, to compete more fairly. Because meritocratic values seemed divorced from actual organizational practices and employees perceived themselves as being automatically coded as members of race/gender groups who were different from the "norm," many white women and people of color at Eastern found themselves wishing to be gender- and race-free. They wanted to be recognized solely as hardworking individuals who were doing exactly what it takes to get ahead. They accepted that this was a meritocracy and wanted to succeed within it. So they went along with the color-blind, neutered, and individualistic orientation. While white women and people of color articulated the contradictions embedded within the meritocracy, they were resigned to operate within Paul's framework: They would try to realign the system so that access to the hierarchy and positional rewards was truly determined by merit, not by race or gender. They accepted that this would realize the CEO's dream for an organization operating on principles of equality and fairness.

It should also be noted, however, that even the white men in the system were not exempt from bureaucratic stratification (i.e., being judged as more or less acceptable than others based on demographics as well as role and position in the organization) (Ferguson, 1984). As one white middle manager who had not advanced at the speed he had anticipated commented, "You have to be an Ivy League type, come from money, the right family, the right school, and know the right people to get ahead here." Many white men saw themselves outside or on the periphery of the elite white male "in group" (referred to as "the old boy's network" or "the club"), although unlike white women and people of color, they saw the potential for inclusion: "We earned our way in." So, even though navigating the bureaucracy came with a cost (i.e., one had to look, act, and talk in a particular way), white men felt confident that they had "access to opportunities" and an ease in communication with each other—whether it was about "sex, profanity, or sports."

When people talked about the benefits that might come to the bank by emphasizing the importance of diversity, the senior and middle-level white women and people of color expressed views similar to the CEO's (i.e., being more diverse would enhance the corporation's ability to compete globally). In contrast, senior white men tended to talk about diversity as distracting the corporation from attending to the bottom line: "It seems like we're trying to be a social service agency, paternal and benevolent . . . but we're a business. . . . [Eastern] is not going to solve the world's [problems]." Furthermore, many white men were convinced that if they took a major diversity initiative, it would simply turn into another affirmative action program that undermined a system based on merit and obfuscated the problem of incompetent white female and black employees. This position of the white men was then countered by white women and people of color, who insisted that there were real injustices within the system that demanded reparation and that the behavior of all groups had to change.

These conversations exposed some of the discrepancies between Forelli's top managers' newly articulated values and the various realities of people's experience within the corporation. They indicated that many employees felt constrained by the bureaucratic structures in which they were embedded. However, as individuals and groups took the risk of stating their concerns more openly, they found Forelli's assurance that their criticisms would not be responded to in a punitive fashion affirmatively proven. This process alone began to create a more open environment, one in which the character of human relationships was viewed as more legitimate.

During this first year, there were three groups of people within Eastern who were authorized to join with the senior executives in the formal exploration of diversity: a group that called itself the Senior Women's Group, which consisted of mostly white women; another that referred to itself as the People of Color Group, which had mainly African American men and women from the managerial ranks; and the newly formed EAC. However, as these groups formally debated what diversity meant and how to go about making Eastern more hospitable to white women and people of color, clusters of people with different identity group memberships from across Eastern got involved in the debate in many informal ways. These groups were called White Men, White Women, Men of Color, and Women of Color. By the end of Year 1, all members of Eastern were growing increasingly conscious of their own race and gender and how this impacted their experiences at work.

#### **Phase II: "We Value Diversity" and "Pushing Down Decision Making" (Year 2)**

Twelve months after Paul articulated his vision of a caring, color-blind organization, he described in his next annual talk the progress the organization had made in becoming more people-centered as well as the long road still ahead. He singled out several organizational advances: the HR division had reorganized and created a performance appraisal system that was expected to eliminate the inequities of the past; significant and valuable data had been gathered via the bank's first-ever employee survey; the EAC had disseminated throughout the organization the six Key Values intended to serve as Eastern's moral compass; and the EAC was working hard to frame and imple-

ment the goal of having people become more empowered. However, Paul expressed his disappointment that many managers seemed to ignore the importance of creating a satisfying workplace based on the newly promulgated values. He expressed particular concerns about the high personal cost of corporate cultural life, particularly on white women and people of color, as revealed in the employee survey.

In this second speech, the CEO's language had shifted significantly. He no longer spoke about changing individual behavior. Rather, he began addressing the importance of employees' identity group memberships. He highlighted that Eastern needed to recognize that employees came from varied backgrounds, cultures, and genders. Reciting the data from Workforce 2000 (Johnson & Packer, 1987), he explained that "the diversity of our employee base will . . . follow the pattern of regional demographics . . . 80% of entrants will be female, black, Hispanic, and Asian." While he acknowledged that for some managers the infusion of "new" people might be a difficult change, eventually they and the organization as a whole would need to "recognize, value, and build on these differences." Paul's intention was both to legitimize employees who were joining the workforce from these "new" groups and to signal to "old" employees that adjusting to these changes would be necessary—although difficult—because it was a critical element in the organization's longtime survival.

He also announced that he had accepted the EAC's recommendation to hire an outside diversity consulting firm to help Eastern address the race and gender concerns that had been identified as problematic in the employee survey. In addition, Paul publicly sanctioned the ongoing development of organizational groups such as the Senior Women's Group and the People of Color Group to promote the career interests of white women and people of color in the bank.

While Paul's communication to the organization about diversity attempted to reinforce the notion of individual and group acceptance, on examination, it contained a number of subtle contradictory messages. For example, Paul framed women and people of color as the "new" entrants to the workforce, subtly distinguishing them from an older, more established crowd (i.e., the white men). He seemed not to realize that he could be setting up these so-called "outsiders" (women and people of color) to be stigmatized as an "unlawful" or less than "rightful" group that the white men were having to "manage."

Paul's comments failed to account for the reality that white women and people of color had been a very large part of Eastern's labor force for several decades, albeit within the organization's lower levels. At that time, women constituted slightly more than 60% of all employees, with people of color making up approximately 30%. In addition, the only places within the bank where women and people of color were "new" were the few who had made it into positions of authority. White women made up 12% of the senior managers, while less than 1% of the managers were people of color. Paul did not seem to be cognizant of the research that indicated the absence of white women and people of color in the upper echelons of the hierarchy was not a result of disinterest, poor skills, lack of education, or experience in the workforce (Alderfer & Thomas, 1987; Bell, 1990; Davis & Watson, 1982; Fernandez, 1981; Loden & Rosener, 1991; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Morrison, 1992). Rather, it was a consequence of the structural and cultural barriers that made entrance into and/or pro-

motions within higher-level management positions difficult or impossible. Focusing on the “flood” of new entrants, instead of the obstacles that kept certain workers locked out or marginalized, shifted the locus of responsibility away from the organization and its executives. Thus, while “valuing diversity” was the substantive centerpiece of Paul’s vision, which enabled employees to go beyond color-blind individualism and own their group identities, it was still braided with potentially damaging undercurrents that could heighten cross-cultural animosities as well as maintain the “one-up” position for white men.

However, while Paul’s stance on diversity may have contained conflicting messages, his position on organizational decision making was straightforward. Decision making had been concentrated at the top, and the autonomy and ability of those in lower positions to take responsible actions was severely limited. This had been clearly revealed in the employee survey. Paul acknowledged that they did not have “decision-making authority” to do their jobs well and he wanted that to be changed. The employee survey had indicated that more than half the respondents felt that “risk taking [was] discouraged” and that they were undervalued, underappreciated, and silenced by the informal bureaucratic norms that viewed conformity as loyalty.

The CEO spoke openly and often about empowerment. He was critical of the systemic obstacles that impeded creative problem solving and quality service delivery inside and outside the organization. While still emphasizing the need for interpersonal change at both the attitudinal and behavioral levels, Paul became focused on creating a less bureaucratic decision-making structure, one that would shift a lot of power out of the hands of the senior and middle management and into the hands of the workers. Ultimately, this would mean breaking up the bastions of white male power and giving it to people of color and women.

Paul also initiated a conversation about the new assumptions he wanted to undergird the long-term relationship between the institution and its workers. Because mergers and downsizing were now unavoidable aspects of living in an unpredictable, often hostile market economy, the organization could not be expected to provide lifetime job security. Realistically, Eastern would periodically need to reorganize and/or downsize, increasing the likelihood of terminating workers unexpectedly. However, during their tenure, workers would be treated humanely and provided with opportunities for growth, development, and participation in an “empowered workforce.” In addition, the organization would hold itself accountable for handling the “cut-back” process with aplomb, trying to preserve individuals’ dignity.

His position on job security raised questions about the kind of “real” power employees might eventually possess in the organization. His comments could be interpreted as a strategy for reforming yet another aspect of the paternal relationship between workers and employers inherent within the context of bureaucratic life. Rather than assuming organizations “take care of” employees for life in exchange for their obedience, conformity, and loyalty, organizations like Eastern now would provide workers with enriching but transitory opportunities in humane environments that encourage creative problem solving and local decision making. But just as each employee would be expected to make choices that best suited his or her development,

the organization would be granted that same freedom. Top management, on behalf of the organization, would regularly determine “which people working in what functions” would help this more “streamlined” organization to achieve its goals. Consequently, while employees might perceive themselves as having greater authority in the decisions that impacted their daily work lives, their voices would be muted in the most critical of decisions—whether a reengineering or downsizing process would be initiated at all and, if it did, its scope. Nonetheless, Paul strengthened the messages that “the playing field had to be leveled,” that “differences were to be valued,” and that “the employees would be empowered.”

Following the new mandate given to them by the CEO, the EAC gave a long-term contract to a group of diversity consultants to run 2- to 3-day “diversity training workshops” to several hundred employees, including all the top people in the organization, and to introduce an analytic framework focused on systemic change and the amelioration of oppression. Based on a set of top-down organizational development change strategies, the message the diversity consultants conveyed, both through their literature and their way of functioning, was that they would adopt a process-based change strategy intended to ameliorate racism, sexism, and other forms of workplace discrimination by removing individual, group, and organizational barriers that prevent full use of all employees. They were focused on improving management practices and policies and altering organizational norms, work relationships, and operational procedures.

Although coming in with a clearly defined set of beliefs and approaches, the diversity consultants worked in partnership with Eastern and members of the EAC and ran scores of workshops focused on issues related to race and gender. Paul attended one workshop in each of the series that occurred during the spring and summer of Year 2. Paul’s participation in the workshops provided an important role model for others in the organization and served to dispel certain fears that diversity was a passing fad. This helped others to take more risks. Besides the message that Paul’s attendance at these workshops sent to other workers, he made some significant shifts in his own attitudes about organizational diversity. Paul acknowledged that when he went into the workshop, he believed he had very little to learn. In a private interview, he said that he went into the workshops with the posture “that I didn’t need any of this really . . . I did it more to show support.” Furthermore, he believed the scope and intensity of organizational obstacles preventing white women and people of color from bringing their full talents to the organization or from being recognized for their contributions were fairly easily surmountable. He privately thought that these inhibitors had been exaggerated and were attributable to minorities’ hypersensitivities. After listening to many white women and people of color describe their experiences in and out of the bank and having their experiences linked to the analytic framework offered by the consultants that explained how bias, discrimination, and institutional “isms” worked, Paul became convinced of the multilayered nature of the problem. He said,

When I walked into the workshop, I thought: People of color felt they are being discriminated against more than they are . . . but I see it’s happening a greater ratio more of the time . . . and, of course, the thing that was staggering was the cumulative impact of it all.

By the late summer of 1992, Paul was no longer discussing diversity as an issue related to organizational mergers, individual style differences, or simply demographic differences. Instead, he was specifically focused on the problems of racism and sexism within the bank and the need to eliminate the structural barriers that made it all but impossible for people of color and white women to do their jobs well or to get ahead. Aligning his goals more closely with those of the diversity consultants, he stated, "Diversity is a strategy for eradicating oppression." He also declared publicly that he had come to recognize that it would take 7 to 10 years to achieve the stated goal of the culture change process he had started—namely, that employees' differences would be truly valued and that people from all walks of life would be given the same access to opportunities for advancement. He also stated that once the organization had a handle on race and gender issues, additional concerns such as heterosexism and ageism would have to be addressed. This set of comments opened the door for other "interest groups," particularly gays and lesbians, to begin mobilizing within the bank.<sup>3</sup>

During the second half of Year 2, the EAC produced a document called "The Diversity Action Plan." The intent was to provide a framework for the type of activities in which various units within Eastern potentially could engage during the next year to address/redress some of the organization's diversity-related problems. Draft copies of this document were circulated to a very large number of groups within Eastern, and literally hundreds of Eastern employees provided input into this document before a final version was promulgated.

While culture-changing activities were in motion at the organizational level, deep conversations about race, gender, and status flourished in all kinds of groups at Eastern. These exchanges indicated that people from all walks of life were changing their understandings of themselves, how they understood racial and gender dynamics in Eastern as a whole, and the need for the distribution of organizational power to shift. For example, many senior white women began documenting problems for women at Eastern and sharing this information with Paul. They became the champions of removing obstacles for women throughout the system. The Senior Women Group's singular focus on gender, however, weakened the voices of the women of color. This led to the emergence of an African American Women Managers Group. They claimed they had to get organized because no one was looking after their concerns. As one African American woman explained, "The Senior Women are dominated by white women. . . . If changing power is just transposing power to others . . . having new people bully others . . . it's not OK. . . . It's only acceptable if white women use their power differently . . . for support, inclusion, and making things grow."

The senior white men, on the other hand, did not see the character of their white maleness and the ways they acted and reacted as white males to be a problem needing to be addressed. Instead, they saw their organizational status, the power they had, and the way they used their power to be the problem requiring remediation. In their failure to see themselves as a group whose identity and organizational group memberships overlapped, they had little cognizance of the implications of their whiteness or maleness either on the decisions they made, how they used power, or the ways that others perceived them. However, as they listened in the diversity workshops to those who were different from themselves, these senior white men began to question the validity

of their commitment to the meritocracy. As they came to understand how their race and gender advantaged them, they also began to recognize that the systemic barriers they supported prohibited white women and people of color from contributing their full talents and being acknowledged and rewarded for their good work. “No longer,” said one VP, “could we dismiss the concerns of individuals to individual anecdotal stories that can be rejected because people are whiners and complainers.”

In contrast, for employees at lower levels of the organization who were not directly involved with helping to design, participate in, or implement the change process, there was a sense of alienation. In interviews with branch personnel in Year 2 of the change initiative, there was a sense of “business as usual,” which reflected the belief that the diversity initiative was organized around the needs of the management at Eastern, not those of the employees at the lower levels. Such employees did not own or particularly identify with the Core Values and felt the diversity initiative was not addressing the right issues because, in their view, there were huge inconsistencies between how the organization should behave and how it actually treated its employees. For example, workers in the branches were very upset that the criteria for gaining recognition and advancement remained extremely unclear. They felt that while Eastern claimed it was emphasizing quality services to the customers, all the messages they received were that the only thing that mattered was volume or quantity. Those who spent time addressing a customer’s valid concerns got penalized. As one female teller said, “We’re only recognized for the work that brings in money . . . I hate that . . . they don’t understand the work that goes into building relationships with customers, solving problems, and helping our colleagues.”

As the diversity initiative became more focused on issues of race and gender and the increasing diversity of the workplace, those at the bottom grew increasingly convinced that their perspectives were irrelevant and that senior managers were out of touch with the real pressures and tensions associated with nonexempt work. Many employees reported that while their own ranks were already demographically diverse, having a significant number of African Americans, Latinos, or white women did not mean there was no discrimination. Furthermore, they had little faith in the bank’s commitment to removing obstacles that prevented them from fully contributing to the organization and/or developing professionally. Expressing their dismay about their lack of inclusion in the decision-making processes that affected their lives, a number of employees saw their choices as either having to suffer in silence or speak out and risk retribution. Despite this pressure to not complain about the way the organization functioned, many low-level employees repeatedly spoke out about their objections to procedures and policies that hindered them from functioning effectively.

### **Phase III: Eradicating Oppression and Interdependent Partnerships (Beginning of Year 3)**

By the beginning of Year 3, the CEO had set the stage for fairly dramatic institutional changes. He continued to focus on the need for a caring, humane organization. However, inspired by his diversity workshop experiences and influenced by the perspectives of the diversity consultants, Paul expressed his belief that Eastern’s commit-

ment to diversity was no longer about accepting and/or tolerating “others” within its ranks because of the inevitability of demographic changes. Instead, he affirmed that valuing diversity demanded a more proactive stance. Although Eastern mirrored society’s ills in general, he wanted the bank to become a role model for other institutions. He wanted to reverse the patterns that he claimed had led to “the profound inequities, lack of respect, and deep hatred among different (races) in Americas.”

Paul envisioned an environment in which employees would have equal access to opportunities and people’s differences would be respected, tapped, and celebrated. Furthermore, systemic barriers would be eliminated at the individual, group, and organizational levels. Having heard what people in the branches had said, he announced to all of Eastern that the scope of the “managing diversity” initiative was about to be altered. For him, the unit of change had become the entire organization. It had moved from individual change, thoroughly altering group and intergroup relations, to creating an organization that was able to foster the development of all individuals, regardless of rank and department, and to enable them to engage in productive, caring relationships with people who were different from themselves. In addition, he stated that the dimensions of differences to be addressed were no longer limited to race and gender but included sexual orientation, age, and any other demographic characteristic that led to marginalization.

Moreover, he wedded the diversity initiative to the need for structural change and laid out how he expected managers to use their authority. Rather than carrying out the more traditional bureaucratic functions, such as providing oversight and correction or strict gatekeeping around the information flow, managers were to become teachers, coaches, and communicators. The task of senior managers was to help people at all levels to become better problem solvers and risk takers. He announced that people who challenged inconsistencies between organizational values, policies, and practices would be treated as making a very positive contribution to the organization. Managers also were put on notice that they were to learn how to work with all people irrespective of their group identities. They all would be given the help and opportunities to develop these skills. However, those unable or unwilling to do so would be asked to find other employment. He also announced that he was setting aside \$3 million to enable employees to become shareholders. This was intended to signal that all workers were “owners” of the organization, and he hoped that this would both reinforce employees’ investment in their work and encourage them always to ask what was in the best interests of the whole organization.

The CEO also began using the metaphor of partnerships to describe the relationships he wanted to establish beyond the organization’s four walls. Maintaining the notion of caring, respectful, mutually beneficial relationships as a template, Paul described how employees, customers, the community, and stockholders were now all equally important elements of a larger constellation working together for their mutual financial success and satisfaction. By Year 3, Paul’s vision had become more multifaceted: He imagined a stimulating, caring, inclusive organizational environment that would enable employees—who were in overlapping roles as shareholders and customers—to work cooperatively across organizational as well as identity group memberships to generate high-quality goods and services. While individuals would seek to achieve on

behalf of the organization and their work teams, the organization would provide a forum for individuals to attain their own individual dreams and aspirations. He had come to see this altered climate as enhancing Eastern's capacity to operate in the "global competitive market" and not as a drain on the bottom line.

His annual speech at the beginning of Year 3 announced that all established organizational and identity groups were formally seen as helping in the culture change, and he welcomed the emergence of new groups that might join in this process, such as the Gay and Lesbian Group which, until that time, had felt the need to operate as an underground support group.

Thus, as Paul indicated via his speech at the beginning of the third year of Eastern's evolving culture change process, he wanted the bank to fully change its organizational culture and he viewed diversity as a core thread in the larger culture change process. In addition, as the language of relationships, teamwork, and community began to coexist alongside personal gain and reward, traditional bureaucratic power relations were being confronted at both the cultural and structural levels. In offering stakeholder groups a more mutual set of interrelationships, Eastern not only looked to further its own internal change but to alter significant aspects of its external environment—a step toward proactively establishing the context for doing business (Weick, 1979).

## REFLECTIONS

The multiple group identities (race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, etc.) that all people bring to organizational life mean that each person embodies several, and often competing, social realities (Hill-Collins, 1990; Smith, 1982). For some, these perspectives are contradictory, while for others they are mutually reinforcing. For example, with white men, both their racial and gender identity place them in socially privileged groups that classically have power over white women and people of color. In contrast, white women and black men belong to both dominant and subordinate identity groups, while women of color in the United States are typically on the bottom in terms of race and gender (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Cross, 2000). By opening up questions about the cultural values, beliefs, and norms within an organization and having employees respond from their race, gender, and organizational group perspectives, the links between who has power, influence, and access to organizational rewards, and the race/gender stratification in the organization becomes explicit. As the leadership and various groups at Eastern interacted and developed new understandings about group and intergroup experiences throughout the bank, the organizational discourses—the ways in which knowledge (sources of meaning) and power (structures, relations, and processes) are constructed (McPherson & Fine, 1996; van Dijk, 1987)—began to shift.

The managerial conversations at Eastern that surfaced in Year 1, after the CEO introduced the culture change process, brought new perspectives on how power and influence worked at Eastern. The bank began to discuss both across racial and gender lines and within racial and gender groups how race and gender impacted their experiences at work. In this first year, one discourse that occurred was focused on the myth of the meritocracy. At Eastern, not only did the system fail to judge or reward individuals'

performances solely on merit, but also it had enabled white men to advance just because they were white men and fit the prescribed profile that the bureaucratic norms, policies, and practices were designed to serve. For white women, the lack of merit was reflected primarily in promotional practices. For people of color, while they also experienced promotional discrimination, they were concerned about more basic issues such as who were getting the jobs in the first place and how to make sure they did not get fired. People of color believed that it was hard enough for them to just get their foot in the door and to prove they deserved to keep their job. White men, on the other hand, saw it differently. They complained about the hardships of working within a bureaucratic system that demanded their loyalty, conformity, and time and claimed that it was both hard work and personally costly to get ahead. They saw the talk about race and gender as a way to mask what they described as “the incompetence of flawed individuals” and argued that this distracted the bank from its core work: increasing corporate profits.

Over time, however, through ongoing interactions facilitated by the diversity consultants that had been hired by Eastern, people began constructing new ways to understand the connections or lack of connections between themselves, other groups, and the organization as a whole. By Year 2, trying to get individuals to fit the system was no longer the primary goal for the Senior White Women or the People of Color groups. Both these groups had shifted their emphasis. They no longer were invested in making the system work better by getting individuals to change. Instead, they repeatedly called for systemic changes and a major overhaul of policies and practices. This gave rise to a discourse that had the concept of empowerment at its core. On listening to the experiences and demands of white women and people of color, the Senior Management Committee, which consisted mostly of white men, managed to hold previous assumptions at bay and hear old information in new ways. Soon they could no longer comfortably label the problems as being caused by “whiny individuals” or “undeserving minorities,” as they had previously. This helped them to generate a more complex critique about themselves as a group and their relationships to the organization as a whole. This opened up an organizational discourse about the origins, function, and consequences of what was labeled “white male privilege.” A new kind of understanding about intergroup relationships had been spawned. It took in rather than ignored the role of race and gender and accounted for the possibility that organizational policies and procedures might actually be discriminatory.

Along with the shifts in the character of the dialogues themselves were changes in the number and character of identity and organizational groups that appeared in Eastern and elected to join in the dialogue. While the Senior Women and People of Color groups were the only two officially sanctioned organizational groups in place during Year 1, a number of new informal groups soon surfaced (e.g., the Women’s Network, the African American Women’s Group, and the Gay and Lesbian Group). They were subsequently sanctioned, as indicated in Figure 1, but their arrival on the scene caused new discourse communities to form and also signaled that the culture was beginning to change. Previously, when informal groups gathered to discuss or complain about policies and procedures promulgated by senior management, this activity had been seen as subversive. By Year 2, when they weighed in on these same issues, the actions of these

informal groups were viewed by the organization as a whole as both legitimate and helpful. The formation and development of identity-based support and advocacy groups also led to some structural changes and major alterations in the ways work was organized.

In explicating the relationship between discourse and structure, Barrett et al. (1995) describe how discourse “transforms organizational structures by altering or augmenting the set of interlocking assumptions that in turn shape the linguistic patterns and conventions” (p. 358). At Eastern, as more individuals and groups participated in the process of creating change, the assumption that only those senior white men at the top had sole “rights of interpretation” (Weick, 1991, p. 127) vanished. In its place came a new value, that those who were affected had a right to express their opinions.

However, still missing from the discourses about diversity at Eastern was the relationship between status and social class. Groups at the lowest levels of the organization still were not being included. They remained detached from the process and had few ways to connect to the emerging discourse communities. Yet, in this powerful nexus of conversations and silences about structure, culture, and diversity, this organization actually was changing in dramatic ways.

## CONCLUSION

This research makes the claim that the dynamic conversations within and among the various identity and organizational groups and the leadership changed how diversity came to be understood at Eastern and the way the diversity initiative was implemented. It shows that meaning making is an active, dynamic, and participative process rather than something that is imposed (Barrett et al., 1995). Groups at multiple levels of the organization and across a diverse set of identity groups became part of the fabric of one or more discourse communities. They, in partnership with the formal leadership, have the task of collectively co-constructing and interpreting the organizational realities. Consequently, it was possible to acknowledge, rather than submerge, contradictory values, beliefs, and differences (Bartunek & Moch, 1992; McGovern & Hope-Hailey, 1997; Zak, 1994). By linking group, intergroup, and organizational issues to the statements that leadership was making about the organization both internally and to its external constituencies, a more textured understanding of the sense-making process was possible.

This perspective of co-constructing meaning stands in sharp contrast to the assumptions underlying the culture change framework presented by theorists such as Daft (1989), Schein (1992), and Trice and Beyer (1993), who suggest that effective change occurs when the CEO or senior leader articulates his or her vision and imposes his or her own assumptions about the way in which the culture should operate, with employee participation being dedicated primarily to getting people to “buy in.” This research does support the need for a strong organizational champion who can articulate a vision, commit resources, and demonstrate behaviors that can move the organization forward (Cross, 2000; Cross, Katz, Miller, & Seashore, 1994). However, it also points to the idea that the creation of discourse communities constitutes a rich form of

participation that greatly enhances the culture change process. At Eastern, the more traditional approach to a cultural change was altered when the CEO, after introducing the idea that color-blind equality was the desired future, authorized the creation of many settings in which employees could talk honestly about their experience in the organization. This opened up the possibility for new and quite different discourse communities to emerge, and these communities pushed the boundaries of contested meanings, legitimizing both new activities and conversations.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Methods of Data Collection**

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1. Archival Data
    - CEO's annual speeches (3)
    - Diversity video (1)
    - "Core Values" poster (1)
    - Employee newsletters (3)
    - Organizational memos (30)
    - Diversity Action Plan (1)
  2. Participant Observation
    - EAC meetings (12)
    - Diversity Committee meetings (9)
    - Diversity consultants and workshops (3)
    - Senior women's monthly meetings (6)
    - Retreat (1)
    - Women's networking conference (1)
  3. Focus Group Data
    - Pre-survey focus groups (5)
    - Senior women's focus groups (14)
    - Upstate women's groups (9)
    - Branch focus groups (1)
  4. Interviews
    - Biographies (4)
    - Individual follow-up interviews (15)
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## **NOTES**

1. In the interest of privacy, all names, institutional and individual, are pseudonyms.
2. For example, after interviewing members of one particular branch to determine their perspective on the new organizational values that the CEO disseminated, I analyzed the data and fed it back to the branch

employees. While I used the analysis as a way to understand the experience at the branch level, the data also fed into a larger conceptual framework about the relationship between group and organizational talk.

3. In helping to prepare the Employee Satisfaction Survey in Year 1, we talked to groups about the streams of diversity present at Eastern. There was little mention of sexual orientation and disabilities. When we asked people more directly about the silence confronting us, a few ventured to say the following:

To be out there is to commit political suicide.

The "trimmings" of the gay lifestyle are unacceptable; there's no coming out of the closet . . . there is also prejudice about gay customers.

The only obvious connection to gayness is if you're someone dying of AIDS.

Although the lid on the silence had been lifted slightly through our questions, it was going to require more time and more official sanction before people would feel safe enough to talk about it publicly.

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