



# A Deliberately Developmental Organization: A New Organizational Space for Inclusion

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's world is characterized as being VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. In this new environment, it is almost impossible to conceptualize and predict reality with accuracy. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2013) described such a fluid and unreliable characteristic of the present conditions of the world in which we live as “liquid modernity.” As such, transformative learning, which has long been practiced as a useful method for individual growth and development, is gaining greater relevance than ever before, calling us to critically reexamine assumed ways of knowing, doing, and being, and potentially change them to better adapt to constantly evolving circumstances (Mezirow, 2003).

However, in today's highly interconnected world, there is also an increasing need for various social actors—individuals, organizations,

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communities, nations, and so on—to learn collaboratively and find innovative ways to meet the demands of the upcoming society. Racial discrimination, inequalities in education and health, unemployment, and climate change are just a few examples of the kinds of complex issues that humanity is currently faced with. As Bohm (1996) suggested over twenty years ago, what seems vital for contemporary leaders of all kinds in these challenging times is perhaps their ability to create spaces for authentic inquiry and dialog: Where all stakeholders can come together with no predetermined or fixed purpose, agenda, or interest, rather than to problem solve in a siloed manner. Only by creating such free and empty spaces for all can the possibilities of generating something new emerge (Nicolaidis, 2015). Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) described this evolutionary unfolding process as “learning from the emerging future,” which demands the radical opening of both one’s mind (cognitive boundaries) and heart (relational boundaries).

As an academic, my ongoing inquiry has been centered around creating organizational conditions for deep relational learning (Cunliffe, 2016) and understanding how diversity is experienced in such a context (Bouten-Pinto, 2016). Aligned with the findings of Lambrechts et al. (2008), my research has shown that high quality relationships cultivated within a generative learning space hold the potential for transcending power differentials deriving from a variety of human differences (Kwon, 2019, 2020; Kwon & Nicolaidis, 2017, 2019). I believe that this line of research is particularly timely and promising in thinking about new ways of leading and organizing diversity in a VUCA world. Therefore, my purpose in this chapter is to present Robert Kegan’s theory and practice of Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDO) as an alternative organizational space for inclusion, where the diversity of perspective that comes from all members of the organization becomes a live source of continuous transformative learning. To accomplish this goal, I will begin by discussing current diversity and inclusion practices in organizations and by stating the organizing principles on which these practices are based. Then, I will provide the core tenets of DDO and explain how they are distinct from how conventional organizations work. Finally, I will endeavor to make the case of how this new space of organizing contributes to developing a workplace culture that is inclusive of diversity.

## CURRENT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PRACTICES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Diversity and inclusion is one of the most attended topics in the management of contemporary organizations and is causing more leaders to recognize the benefits of having diversity and its strategic role in the success of the organization. According to results of interviews conducted with eleven CEOs known for making a public commitment to diversity, managers care about diversity because it helps them secure top human resources from diverse talent pools, create a culture that learns from diverse perspectives, and understand diverse customer bases (Johnson, 2017). Simply said, the purpose of most of these change initiatives, if not all, is to establish a business case for inclusion, through which organizations can enhance their competitive advantage. In discussing the historical development of diversity and inclusion practices, Thomas and Ely (1996) proposed this form of inclusion to be called the “learning and effectiveness paradigm,” where achieving organizational goals through increased creativity and innovation derived from people with diverse skills and knowledge is at the heart of inclusion. Dass and Parker (1999) argued that when organizations respond to diversity challenges in such a proactive way, inclusion strategies are systematically incorporated at all levels and parts of the organization.

However, critical diversity scholars have been skeptical about this strictly managerial view on diversity that essentializes human differences (Hoobler, 2005; Noon, 2007). Their central argument is that in mainstream diversity research, individual identities are conceptualized as fixed and stable, overlooking historically determined structural power differentials that are prevalent in organizations. Moreover, this positivistic approach to diversity is limited in its ability to explain the notion of intersectionality and the ongoing agency exercised by individuals in resisting a dominant culture that marginalizes them. A recent study conducted by Dashper (2019) is a perfect example that illustrates the limitations of traditional diversity programs in addressing deep-seated issues of inequality in the workplace. Her analysis of interview data gathered from a total of 30 mentors and mentees participating in a women’s mentoring program in the female-dominant events industry found that the program reproduced effects of masculine hegemony, despite the original intent to tackle persisting gender inequality. Specifically, the participants’ attitudes were ambivalent, and often contradictory, in that they attributed the cause

of their discriminatory experiences to themselves personally and sought support from senior male leaders as a form of authorization in continuing the program. The findings of this study are surprising because they demonstrate how strong existing masculine norms and values are, even in the industry that is relatively favorable to women. In a similar vein, Janssens and Zaroni (2014) contended that an approach that taps into structural factors of inequality is needed, rather than individual-focused programs or policies aimed at reducing personal biases.

What is more problematic, in a fundamental sense, is that a business case approach to inclusion can paradoxically serve as its own reason for excluding diversity. While diversity was positively reframed to be worthy of inclusion, it may no longer be prioritized when it is determined not to be contributing to organizational bottom lines, or when the organization is faced with economic downturn. Recently, during the COVID-19 crisis, we have observed numerous incidents of societal fallback toward intolerance, non-inclusivity, and even violence and hate crimes against members of underrepresented communities. In most organizations dictated by the neoliberal economic principle of profit maximization, it is reasonable to anticipate that efforts for diversity and inclusion may, at any point, experience difficulties in gaining continued support inside and outside the organization. According to one survey conducted by McKinsey and Co, after the COVID-19 outbreak, 27% of diversity and inclusion leaders reported that their organizations had stopped all or most of their diversity and inclusion initiatives due to the pandemic (Dolan et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the vision for creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations for all should, and will never, stop. At this point, before proceeding to present Robert Kegan's Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDO), it should be made clear that the inclusion of diversity in organizations can be discussed at two levels. The first is concerned with the issue of how to make the process of entering organizations inclusive. In other words, how do organizations recruit and hire qualified individuals from diverse groups and build a diverse workforce? The second is concerned with the issue of how to make the culture of organizations inclusive, which is the case I aim to make through a DDO. Once having a diverse workforce, how do organizations ensure that its diverse voices and perspectives are truly heard across the system? My intent in this chapter is not to say that organizations need to focus on one or the other, but to showcase how cultural transformation toward greater inclusivity may

be possible in organizations by deliberately incorporating various developmental principles into everyday work operation. This also leads to my broader definition of diversity that includes but transcends demographic differences in a traditional sense.

Jennifer Brown, an award-winning speaker, consultant, and diversity and inclusion author, wrote in her recent book that the biggest challenge in making truly welcoming and inclusive workplaces lies in how contemporary organizations are structured (Brown, 2016). She asserted that an organizational hierarchy legitimizing top-down, command-and-control leadership that suppresses employees being vocal about their perspectives must be transformed into a new form of organizing, so that workplaces become more motivating, engaging, and fulfilling for everyone, including employees from marginalized groups. It is not a coincidence that she cited companies such as Zappos and Patagonia, whose innovative non-hierarchical management practices were the subject of inquiry for Laloux (2014): A futurist management scholar who has not studied or written specifically about issues of diversity and inclusion. Zanoni et al. (2010) similarly stated that “we plea for diversity studies that actively search for new, emancipating forms of organizing” (p. 19). In my own scholarship, I call this move a paradigm shift (Kwon & Nicolaidis, 2017) because, in this new space of organizing, there would no longer be separation between majority and minority (Kwon & Nicolaidis, 2019). Here, the practice of inclusion is expanded from bringing employees at the margins to the center, to enabling everyone with a variety of needs, perspectives, and experiences to openly participate with all of who they are. How do we create such an organizational culture of inclusivity where employees from marginalized groups are not reduced to parts for organizational performance, but are accepted as themselves, and organizational performance is achieved as a consequence? What are the benefits of such a whole-person approach to inclusion, as distinct from a business case approach to inclusion? In the remainder of this chapter, I will further explore these questions using Kegan’s theory and practice of DDO.

### WHAT IS A DELIBERATELY DEVELOPMENTAL ORGANIZATION?

Robert Kegan is a retired adult development psychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Since his first publication, *The Evolving*

*Self* in 1982, Kegan has made a tremendous influence on the transformative learning community through his development and writing of constructive-developmental theory. His work is primarily about the life-long journey of human development: more specifically, how the meaning making capacity of adults grows and evolves within purposefully cultivated relational spaces of support and challenge (Kegan, 1982, 1994). According to the theory, there are three distinct stages of mind in adulthood: a socialized mind, a self-authoring mind, and a self-transforming mind.

People at the stage of a socialized mind tend to be dependent when interacting with others. Their action is overly influenced by others' perspectives and external circumstances. Meeting the norms and expectations of the groups, institutions, or society that they belong to and think are of importance becomes a guide for their thinking and decisions. Growing into a self-authoring mind, people become more independent in their ways of knowing. They begin to have their own internal meaning making systems, through which the assessments or suggestions of others are organized according to self-determined philosophies and priorities. Taking into account personal needs, values, and desires in relation to those of others becomes available to self-authored people. People with a self-transforming mind acknowledge the interdependence of multiple individuals with distinct worldviews and identities. They recognize the limitations inherent in their own systems of thinking and continually seek for ways to grow their minds. They have the capacity to examine both self and others through a spirit of co-existence and manage the complexities and tensions existing in a larger system within which they are embedded.

The book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, that Kegan and his colleagues published in 2016 is an extended version of constructive-developmental theory in the organizational context. It discusses what organizations can do to create conditions in which their employees can continuously learn and grow; and as a result of such a developmental practice, how organizations can become more adaptive and productive in responding to the needs of the customers that they serve (Kegan & Lahey, 2016).

To briefly explain what a DDO looks like, it is comprised of three conceptual structures: edge, groove, and home. First, *edge* represents the height of a DDO's developmental aspiration. A DDO is organized around the simple but fundamental principle of helping its employees continuously learn, grow, and develop. This is an ontological value that

all members of a DDO embrace and live with. In a DDO, development is understood qualitatively as the process of overcoming individual limitations, weaknesses and blind spots, and evolving to have the capacity to engage in complex thinking (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). This is distinct from the way most non-developmental organizations view development; for example, expanding the size of business or climbing up a corporate ladder. One might wonder how such a developmental approach to leading organizations meets the organizational need to perform and remain competitive. However, it is not the case that a DDO exists only to support employees. DDOs are strictly business-driven, in addition to being developmental. DDOs do not see performance and development as either/or. For DDOs, profits are an outcome of their systematized practice of encouraging and even rewarding people to continuously work on becoming better versions of themselves.

Next, *groove* represents the breadth of a DDO's developmental practice. One common way in which development takes place in a DDO is through feedback. By actively and systematically exchanging feedback in daily work contexts, people can constantly gain new perspectives, personally and professionally. This allows them to be aware of their areas of improvement and learn from them. Additionally, through a system of regular job rotation, people are provided with ongoing developmental opportunities to expand their scope and ability to take on more complex and challenging work. While gaining mastery and expertise is considered to be an indicator of one's success in traditional organizations, once such a thing happens in a DDO, people are expected to engage in new experiences that step outside their comfort zones so that their growth continues. Fundamentally, all of these practices are enabled within a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). People strive to express their whole selves (as distinct from partial selves), feel comfortable about conflicts or disagreements, and trust that doing so is much more developmental and effective in the long run than hiding one's deep thoughts and acting differently.

Finally, *home* represents the depth of a DDO's developmental community. In a DDO, ranks and titles are not tied to the traditional notion of power: Leaders are instead equally subject to feedback and changing their ways of knowing, doing, and being, which truly makes a DDO a developmental community. This is a radical shift in the way leaders bring themselves to work. Typically, the norm is that command and control are necessary for effective people management and that leaders must have

clear future directions for organizations. Employees are taught, implicitly or explicitly, not to question and to simply follow the instructions of leaders. However in a DDO, everyone becomes a teacher and a learner. Everyone, from entry-level employees to senior leaders, all have things to say, and all perspectives are received as valid ones. In a sense, a DDO becomes a strong, trustworthy holding environment where everyone can feel comfortable being vulnerable and learning from such experiences.

In short, what DDOs practice is the intentional design of themselves in a way that fosters continuous transformative learning, allowing for the realization of the full potential of both individuals and organizations. At an individual level, people can constantly learn new ways of doing things, relating with others, and engaging in organizations. Employees are supported while growing from a socialized mind to a self-authoring mind with an ability to speak up and share feedback independently to others. Leaders are challenged to grow from a self-authoring mind to a self-transforming mind by constantly being reflective of the limits of their ways of knowing and are also challenged to seek opportunities for mutual growth and development. At an organizational level, the cultivation and spread of a developmental culture enable ongoing inquiry, dialog, and reflection for transformative learning, which leads to greater creativity and innovation.

### LEVERAGING THREE LESSONS FROM DELIBERATELY DEVELOPMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

How does this new space of organizing contribute to the evolving discourse of diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations? The perspective I take and aim to feature here is a novel one, given few applications have been made with a constructive-developmental framework and issues of diversity or social justice. For example, Eberly et al. (2007) examined student teachers' dispositions toward racial diversity and argued for the need to help them gain more complex and systemic perspectives so that they can grow into more culturally sensitive educators of the future. Drago-Severson and Blum-Destefano (2017) provided a more neutral and concrete theoretical analysis regarding how the different developmental-orientations of social justice teachers and leaders may impact the quality of their engagement and interventions in practice. Additionally, Bridwell's (2013) study demonstrated that individuals from groups often regarded as marginalized based on race, class, and gender can equally experience the



epistemological growths posited by constructive-developmental theory; however, its focus was not on the participants' understanding of or attitude toward diversity. As the theory and some of the studies discussed above imply, adults with more complex ways of knowing tend to be capable of recognizing differences as legitimate, and are willing to engage in ongoing inquiry in relationships with others to support and promote mutual growth and development. Yet, little is known about how to foster this sense of connectedness and the deep relational learning that derives from it in organizational, and more specifically, workplace contexts. Below are three points as to how a DDO makes a case for inclusion along with supporting data gleaned from previous research; the goal of which was to understand the experiences of employees with disabilities working for DDOs (Kwon, 2019).

First, a DDO culture promotes the development of all employees through the intentional and ongoing utilization of diverse perspectives. Considering the evidence of inequality perpetuation in organizations, making it harder for less privileged individuals to break down discriminatory practices and succeed professionally (Van Dijk et al., 2020), a DDO offers unique insights into how to systematically provide growth experiences for all of its employees, within existing work contexts and without having to spend extra money. Incorporating developmental principles into everyday work operation (as described in the earlier section) is not only equitable but also cost-effective in today's competitive talent war. If organizations can put the same energy into helping people become the best versions of themselves, instead of competing to recruit and hire the best people, it would be much more sustainable in securing capable human resources (Kegan et al., 2014). In a DDO, there is a strong belief in the potential of all human beings, and the belief that unleashing that potential is the organization's first and foremost mission. It is unlikely that a development in one's perspective will occur without being exposed to and challenged by the diverse experiences of people coming from diverse backgrounds; therefore, a DDO sees human diversity as a valuable asset for ongoing learning that the organization can rely on for long-term success. In sum, DDOs innovatively and equitably engage with the issue of employee development, while building a culture that is genuinely inclusive of diverse perspectives. Below is a quote from an employee with a spinal cord injury describing a developmental culture of his company.

Everyone is encouraged to share their point of view and not only are they encouraged to speak up and say, oh well, this is going on, they are always asking questions like, what do you think about this? And then they can give their point of view and be completely honest without worrying about any kind of repercussions or anything.

He continued to explain how, as a result of his company's developmental culture, he was able to become more skilled in his work.

I would say in my job here, the parts that I make, some of them are simple, some are easy, but there are very difficult ones too. And the ones that are very difficult, you have to scrap so much to get one out of them. And because I just started, it was a challenge because I had to be at a certain level in my profession and I had to get there somehow. So, I spent a lot of time learning and fixing mistakes and trying to get around it. And learning a skill is very hard but I was able to learn that skill and improve, have more finesse with it. And now I got to the point where every time I send a part to QC, that it passes.

As shown above, in a DDO, the interviewee was able to continually push the boundaries of his ability and become more capable at what he does, which is distinct from the lower expectations typically placed on people with disabilities to grow and develop as equally competent professionals like other non-disabled colleagues.

Second, an open and honest DDO culture for transformative learning creates a work environment in which employees can become compassionate to each other's weaknesses. In a DDO, there is a shared understanding that everyone cannot be perfect all the time. This is a revolutionary shift in the way employees are viewed in the workplace, in contrast to the traditional expectation for them to constantly demonstrate competences. Instead of covering up what they lack or do not know, employees support each other's growth and development as well as work on personal challenges. Such a practice demands the welcoming of a whole self and creates a sense of vulnerability deriving from overcoming one's limitations. Yet, it is through this radically open and safe-to-fail environment that employees in a DDO can form an ongoing, real-time learning community (Kwon et al., 2020; Torbert, 2004). Suppose what this developmentally oriented culture would be like for employees from marginalized groups. In traditional organizations, they have been socialized to conform to the dominant norms and values of the organization (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Expressing their deep identities, thoughts, and values have been perceived to be deviant from the image of an ideal

worker. However, a DDO culture respects all of its employees from both dominant and non-dominant groups as persons and professionals, so that everyone can bring their best selves to work. Below is a quote from an employee with an anxiety disorder illustrating how the acceptance of his full self enhanced his work experiences in a DDO.

People didn't treat me any different once I explained to them. You're still (name) and every once in a while you get into your feelings. Every once in a while you have your feelings but it's okay. That's cool. We'll hit the rest button. Let's go home. Give time to yourself. You come back the next day and you're fine. And that's really worth my day. Most people would be like, no you got issues man, he's not the right fit. We need to go another route to fit our team or whatever. I got accepted from all around.

The comment above shows well the developmental culture that seeks to support, rather than to punish one's different ability. Through the spirit of deep care and compassion available in a DDO, the interviewee was not expected to fit into the dominant culture but to be himself, which made him to be able to testify that he was accepted all around.

Third, a non-hierarchical DDO culture creates a sense of mutuality and egalitarianism among employees. The idea that all members of the organization, regardless of rank or title, have an equal voice that can practically be reflected in improving work processes and outcomes is engaging for everyone, but particularly empowering for employees from marginalized groups. Recognizing that efforts to increase the representation of employees from marginalized groups across all levels of the organization do not guarantee that their perspectives are fully heard and utilized, the developmental principles practiced in a DDO naturally make it a workplace where diverse perspectives are open for transformative learning. The commitment of leaders to equally participate in the process of mutual inquiry and learning—taking risks to be challenged and experience vulnerability—signals that people development is an essential part of a DDO and that it is indeed safe to make mistakes and learn from them, in relationships with anyone in the organization (Brown, 2018). This modeling of leaders to engage in transformative learning is a crucial condition for the employees of a DDO to become stronger together. Becoming stronger here means growing to be adaptive, creative, and innovative, but more importantly, maturing into humble individuals who are respectful of people different from themselves and who recognize the relational nature

of human beings (Cunliffe, 2016). In a DDO, the full understanding of who someone is demands the perspectives of others, and thus people are always in relationships, supporting each other's sometimes painful but productive processes of uncovering their potential. Below is a quote from an employee with multiple sclerosis explaining a sense of connectedness generated from the practice of mutual learning.

It allows me to be less hard on myself and that's really where the personal development aspect comes in. I am just a girl who essentially stumbled in off the street into this company last year. I was doing my best but it still felt very much out of my league, whereas the woman I was talking to used to be the CEO of a corporation and has been coaching for twenty years and is smart and good at what she does and knows this world. We're relating to each other as equals because in many ways we are equals, and so it reminded me that we are all in the same boat. I am not the only one that has these particular feelings and that we all could deal with the feelings better and perhaps learn from them. So yes, that is freeing.

This is a good illustration of how the genuine commitment to continuous learning as a whole can enable a deep connection among employees beyond their knowledge, experience, and status in organizations.

To summarize, a DDO is organized around the collective yearning for continuous learning, growth, and development. Its interest is in finding ways to facilitate individual transformative learning as a catalyst for organizational growth and development. A DDO intentionally cultivates an organizational culture and structure in which employees can form mutual and trustworthy relationships and safely explore the unknown dimensions of themselves, others, their work, and the system that they are part of on an ongoing basis. Employees invite all of who they are—their deep thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires—as a subject for reflection and learning, which makes a DDO a space for whole-person inclusion (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). This new space of organizing for continuous learning and growth does not leave anyone behind from equal developmental opportunities, helps everyone feel comfortable being who they are and be connected with each other in a way that transcends superficial differences. Of anything else, leaders' capacity to show up and lead with vulnerability seems to be one of the most crucial conditions in which these developmental principles can be systematized and embedded in everyday work operation (Brown, 2018). Although a DDO does not provide specific insights into how to enhance the representation of employees

from marginalized groups in a demographic sense, it is an innovative example of how to create an organizational culture that constantly evolves to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I endeavored to make the case of a Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDO) as an alternative organizational space for inclusion. A DDO's developmental aspiration, practice, and community together make it a place where diverse perspectives are welcomed and embraced for the continued growth and development of all employees, and the organization as a whole. People are connected at a deeper level through the authentic sharing of themselves, enabling a greater understanding toward the experiences of employees from marginalized groups. Leaders' willingness to engage in mutual learning cultivates a spirit of relationality from which new meanings of diversity are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed on an ongoing basis. Such a developmentally oriented, whole-person approach to inclusion radically departs from a traditional, and yet still dominant, business-case approach to inclusion that views diversity as a subject for management. However, this conversation is not merely about how to differently include diversity. The new space of organizing created by a DDO centers around the principles of adult learning and development, and because of the fluidity and emergence derived from ongoing interactions of diverse perspectives; it is most adaptive, generative, and co-creative in meeting the unprecedented challenges of today's complex and rapidly changing world.

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