

Shaping Culture for Diverse Groups

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This is the final installment in our series on culture. Over the last two months Becca McBride asked [Are You a Culture Maker?](#), [Are you a Culture Shaper?](#), and today - [How to Shape Culture for Diverse Groups](#).

We all know how comforting it is to be part of a group that shares your culture. In fact, when given the choice, we typically prefer to be around likeminded people – they legitimize all the things we perceive make us who we are. They serve as mirrors that reflect back to us the components of our identity that we feel give us value. But most often, the strategy of surrounding ourselves with people who naturally make us feel comfortable undermines our ability to build strong, thriving groups. As we are exposed to people who think differently, we expand our understanding of the world and also learn how to better articulate our own perspectives. As we live our lives with people who

have had different life experiences we increase our ability to empathize, encourage, and be flexible in group situations. But diversity in groups must be creatively and effectively navigated in order to unleash the potential of all group members.

This is the final article in a series examining how we can create, shape, and reinforce culture in groups we are leading. In this final article I will argue that as the diversity of your group increases, so does the challenge of creating, shaping, and reinforcing group culture. But at the same time, the importance of engaging in the business of creating, shaping, and reinforcing culture increases exponentially.

An Illustration

As a child of the South, I have lived most of my life around people who were more or less like me, with some small exceptions. When I started teaching at Belmont University in Nashville, my own alma mater, it was an easy transition into the classroom. I knew the culture, knew how to navigate tension, and knew the general expectations of the *type* of students who choose a school like Belmont. I also knew, in general, how women were expected to engage in the academic world – I knew which behaviors would be viewed as aggressive and antagonistic, and which behaviors would be viewed as helpful and supportive. This cultural knowledge gave me the tools I needed to manage my classroom and shape student learning. This culture to which I was an insider was so pervasive that any outsider learned how to assimilate and function within the dominant culture.

When I transitioned to teaching at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, I assumed the transition would be just as seamless. After all, both Belmont and Calvin are Christian colleges, despite the fact that one was Baptist and the other was Christian Reformed. I was teaching the same subject matter at both institutions, and people told me that the South and the Midwest were quite similar. But there were several differences between the two institutions that complicated my transition. First, despite many similarities, Southern and Midwestern cultures are actually quite different in ways that I am still learning to navigate. These differences make it more difficult for me to judge how I will be perceived as a woman *and* an academic. Second, the institutions are quite different. As a denominational school, Calvin has a more particular identity that is tied to the history of the Christian Reformed Church and the distinct line of thought in the Dutch Reformed tradition. These subtle differences meant that I was a natural fit at Calvin, but still a bit of an outsider who needed to be socialized into the environment.

But a third, and more complicated dynamic, was the fact that at Calvin the student body is incredibly diverse. Yes, there are a large number of students who are children of the denomination. But Calvin has a huge global network that draws in students from countries all over the world – these students have varying life experiences, worldviews, and cultural identities. In fact, many of the international students at Calvin are children of foreign missionaries, so Calvin is the *third* culture into which they are orienting. This diversity in my classroom and mentoring groups meant that the tools I used at Belmont were no longer effective. I had different dynamics to navigate in the classroom. I knew that

if I navigated those dynamics well I would thrive in my new environment, but if I failed I would privilege certain voices over others and marginalize students unintentionally.

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Integration v. Assimilation

The dynamics of navigating diverse groups are complex. In general there are four different strategies we tend to pursue when we are put in groups of people who are different from us; as individuals we choose these strategies based on how much we value relationships within the larger group and the degree to which we are protective of our own culture. For example, people who are protective of their own culture tend to either *integrate* into the group strategically or *segregate* into smaller groups within the larger group. Integration means that you maintain your own cultural identity and use that identity to add value to the group because you value relationships within the larger group. Segregation means that you separate out from the larger group based on your cultural identification; you seek out others who can understand your culture and retreat from those who do not understand.

People who are less protective of their cultural identity tend to either *assimilate* into the group seamlessly, becoming like the dominant culture of the group, or to become *marginalized* from the larger group. Assimilation means that you adopt the dominant culture in the group because you see that strategy as the best way to build relationships within the larger group. But assimilation is often pursued at the expense of your own cultural identity. Marginalization means that you retreat from the larger group, not because you are protective of your culture but because you have little desire to build relationships in the larger group.

People who assimilate into larger groups adopt the characteristics of the dominant culture, while people who integrate into larger groups preserve their cultural identity but use that as a tool to engage and contribute to the group. When group members default to strategies of assimilation, segregation, or marginalization, the result is dysfunctional groups based on fear of rejection. The best of all possible strategies is integration, because this frees group members to be cultural ambassadors who represent their culture as they collaborate with other group members.

Strategies for Shaping Culture in Diverse Groups

As a leader of a diverse group, the challenge is to create an environment, through shaping the unique culture of the group you are leading, to nudge group members toward integration instead of assimilation, segregation, or marginalization. This task is more vital for creating successful groups as your membership increases in diversity, but it is also more challenging as the group becomes increasingly diverse. The leader is key to this task, because (s)he must lead by example and model courage, humility, and vulnerability to create an environment in which all participants can thrive.

In closing, let me leave leaders with a challenge. It is vital that you create a group culture that is distinct from any one culture represented in the group. I am not suggesting that the leader must be neutral; in fact, in many ways the leader's purpose is to define values around what is important, which requires value statements, not neutrality. Rather, I am suggesting that the leader must know the group members well enough to 1) at times surprise *all* group members, and 2) require buy in to something that is radically unique. All cultures have redemptive elements, just as all cultures have fallen elements. The challenge is to incorporate redemptive elements of multiple cultures and keep group members from equating the unfamiliar with the fallen. This takes great courage, humility, and vulnerability on the part of the leader, because certain elements being incorporated will undoubtedly be foreign to the leader. Integration requires that we learn from each other *and* serve as cultural ambassadors. A willingness on the part of a leader to learn about others and incorporate what they learn not only models a continually learning heart, it gives your group members courage to follow in the same path.

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