

“They released synergies”

 The well-prepared Diversity Conference showed that it is possible to not just talk about diversity, but to live it as well. *“The overarching network cooperation had synergistic effects and released energy that was still felt at the conference with 200 participants. Thank you for this energy which brought our diversity process one big step forward.”*

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Netwerkvernetzung

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Let's use synergies



An international, global and innovative German technology company wants to interlink ten different internal networks. Some of the network identities were: associates working for the company outside of their home country, experienced associates older than 50, various networks of people from other continents, Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender associates, various women networks.

At the same time these associates are part of the organizational identity. To see the larger picture, beyond the own network identity, it is crucial to develop an organization culture and to generate synergistic effects. The company is convinced that networks are of vital importance. They hold a lot of inherent synergies. The networkers are united to initiate changes in the mind-set of diversity, by working together across borders. Hence their plan was to organize a ‘synergy session’ to prepare the first Diversity Conference.

This conference is the result of a prolonged process of internationalization. For a long time, the company has been involved with gender awareness. In the spring of 2014, the company was ready to widen the perspective and *“unlock the diversity within”*¹.

Network representatives from 10 networks, who make up the so called ‘Diversity Board’, were contacted. They were keen to share their views and find common ground for an afternoon.

“How can network involvement be made visible and tangible?” “What is the point of networks in a large company?” “How can synergies be leveraged from network work?”



¹ Title of a session by Rhonda Tranks, IAF Europe Conference Geneva, 6th October 2012

Benefiting from diversity from the very start

The company decided to replace a gender-focused annual event with a diversity conference, which is to take place every three years. To this end, a Diversity Board was set up which comprises one network representative (short: rep) from each network and reps from the strategic Human Resource policy department. In order to make the commitment and the inherent resources visible, a decision was made to open the first diversity conference to managers. That meant organizing an event with 100 network representatives and 100 managers.

 The manager responsible for diversity called me and posed the question: *“Are you interested and do you have time to prepare the major group conference together with the networks and to shape and moderate it?”* The customer understood that the semi-autonomous networks would have to be supported in synchronizing their ideas and defining content. He asked the crucial question: *“How will you capitalize on diversity and how can we realize shared perceptions?”*

I asked about the goals and the preliminary considerations which had led to this request. Since I knew the client well from previous jobs, I said yes on the condition that I be provided with an internal network representative as a co-facilitator. In this way, my client could benefit from the heterogeneous interplay of internal and external perspectives.

Draw a distinction

We met with network reps and those from the strategic HR policy department to prepare the Diversity Conference. After a brief introductory round, the topics were defined which are relevant to all networks in everyday work. This question led to a neuralgic (= very painful) point: the networks resisted being engaged with each other. They seemed scared to lose their identity!

Each network had created its own identity. A network draws borders around itself. Borders are drawn so naturally, we hardly notice it. “A border, a distinction, between inside and outside is generated by the process of perception.”² This collective construction of reality leads to the impression, that each subgroup has to deal with its own specific issues on its own, like stereotypical assumptions, or being excluded. The created identity has to be maintained, the “otherness” preserved.

They are not aware of larger organizational patterns, crystallizing differently in each network, (the fractal nature of reality. The network reps were guided by their respective interests and own thoughts with reference to their own network experience. How can we overcome these limitations and leverage overarching network synergies? We were faced with a grid-lock.

² After George Spencer-Brown (1969), *Laws of Form*, New York (Dutton) 1979

Differentiation prior to Integration

My co-facilitator used his internal perspective to challenge his colleagues by asking questions with regard to content. As speaker of the African network he was involved. From this inside position he was stretching the way collective perception was constructed in the company. I focused on the process. Due to my external perspective I was able to clearly notice the limitations of the organizational habits. I helped the group to widen the scope of perception and to notice the larger picture. Organizational patterns became more and more aware and so the reps were able to define overarching topics.

 The key was in a methodical move. As an insight of the aforementioned facilitated reflection process, we decided to mirror the following two identity-types in the conference design. In the first half of the diversity conference each network identity was celebrated by 10 network slams (from making loud noises, like in a victory). In the second part the larger picture could be experienced in four interactive areas which became manifest in four rooms. The conference design followed the principle: *Differentiation prior to Integration*.

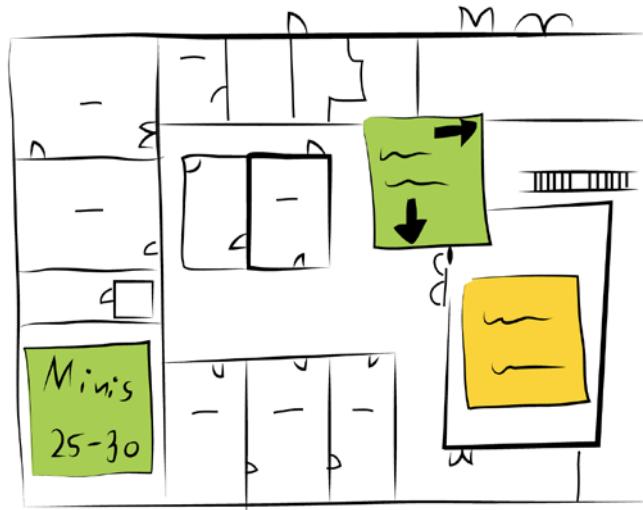
Focusing on overarching topics which impacted all networks, allowed for an exchange and enriching communication which exceeded the considerations of a single network. Four interactive areas resulted, which were developed to span networks and which were recorded:

1. Stereotyping
2. Appreciation and cooperation
3. Work culture
4. Management culture

Mini Open Spaces broaden the cognitive horizon

 First the discussion led to topics limited by the thinking inside of network borders. During the discussion it became clear just how permeable the borders are among the networks. For instance, a woman (women's network) with a technical background (women in technology) started a family (family network) and to work abroad (abroad network). Perception of these permeable boundaries was supported in a Mini Open Space session: "*Netwerkvernetzung*".

This session was facilitated in the style of a conference design for convening groups, in this case the networks, around topics which are most relevant for the group to initiate changes in the mindset of diversity. The Mini Open Space session gave the participants responsibility for creating both their own agenda and experience, like in a real Open Space. Participants were asked to form small groups of 4-5 people and go from poster board to poster board and note ideas, questions and pointers on Post-it stickers. The Mini Open Space session lasted 60 minutes.



The results amazed us all:

1. The energy level in the room was very high.
2. The network community developed an identity over a short period of time, which goes far beyond the individual identities that had previously existed alongside each other.
3. Results came from all networks.
4. As a result of the networked activity, thought processes were set in motion and connections were revealed which had been hidden up to that point.

Through the synergy session it became more obvious to which extent diversity does mean loss of control in terms of

- questioning habits, rules, procedures of the organization
- ineptness how to handle unknown behavior
- the challenge to deal with different cultures

Diversity widens the perspective and holds organizational synergies. At the same time it enhances the complexity to manage the organization. In this sense "Netzwerkvernetzung" is an instrument to redefine the organizational mindset.

Staying aware



I built the methodical framework and gave everyone the possibility to contribute. Important aspects for me included my solution-oriented, appreciative approach, the confidence in the process, the potential of the group and the permanent support of the group process. I constantly invited the participants to make non-judgmental comparisons, and I made them aware of the progress.

Issues about diversity versus unity are universal. For instance the word "division" both means an organizational unit and difference. We tend to focus on the content and not on the form. One of the keys to the success, was keeping the form congruent: diversity and unity with the facilitators, in the preparation and in the actual conference leads to release of energies, the networks try to maintain.