

BEYOND BOXES

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Life is messy.

Boundaries blur between work and life, to-do lists grow while emails pile up next to news feeds, updates from family, and tweets from friends.

People wear different identities as they cross these boundaries throughout their day and shift into different roles. I selectively adjust who I am to fit a set of responsibilities and expectations. I quickly shrug one identity off and put on another as I cross a threshold, pick up my phone, or step into a meeting. In any given day I am an athlete, employee, mentor, mentee, daughter, sister, girlfriend, and friend - all rolled into one.

DIVERSITY
UNDERSTANDING
HAS EVOLVED
AND REQUIRES
AWARENESS
BEYOND BOXES

Diversity understood in these terms is fluid, changeable. This is diversity as it is, as we live it.

This is not Diversity, capital "D." Diversity as we know it is carefully structured. It is the end result of rigid categories with deep social significance, like:

- Race
- Gender
- Age
- Sexual Orientation
- Religion
- (Dis)Ability

This list grows as the understanding of Diversity matures. It now includes, at a minimum:

- Ethnicity
- National Origin
- Culture
- Heritage
- Socioeconomic Status
- Weight
- Family
- Geography
- Political Beliefs / Creed
- Education/Training/Skills
- Cognitive Style
- Personality
- Values

These categories promote generalizations and internal uniformity. As a result they produce one-dimensional characterizations. They support thinking based on assumptions, as opposed to sensitivity to the individual. People are expected to fit into boxes.

Think about how boxes show up at work. For example, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are network groups of employees who join together in their workplace based on a categorical definition of Diversity. They provide support, enhance career development, and contribute to personal development at work. Your firm may have a women's group, a young professionals group, and/or groups for the LGBT community and People of Color.



ERGs are intended to create inclusion, promote engagement, and support diversity. However, consider the following:

- How does a Woman of Color experience work and life compared to her white counterparts in a women's group? What impact does this have on the ERG and her experience in it?
- Is your women's group open to both attorneys and staff?
- How does the LGBT group incorporate allies?
- Is a bi- or multi-racial person a Person of Color?
- How can Baby Boomers show their support of their younger colleagues and their ideas? And, how can Millennials show their support of Baby Boomers?

ERGs are one-dimensional because their organizing premise is based on the limiting categories of Diversity. This version of Diversity (capital "D") limits the understanding of each individual's unique interplay of identities, experiences, and values. These limits have a negative impact on the inclusive environment you want to build. Categories overshadow the real value of diversity – being able to bring your whole self to the office, engage your colleagues authentically, and promote flexibility and creativity.

Diversity (little "d") builds awareness of the nuances of identity. The unique expressions of the individual that arrive through experiences, and are beyond the top 6 listed above comprise the diversity that envelopes creativity and variety of thought. Every day we are the interplay and sum total of many categories. The piece of identity that serves as filter for our experiences, relationships, and activities change based on whom we are with and what we are doing.

Building diversity understanding requires awareness, vision, and communication beyond Diversity. To move away from Diversity limitations in your firm try these simple exercises:

- Raise your awareness of categories through self-exploration. Which categories describe you? Which categories are primary, and come across the loudest? Try turning up the volume on another dimension of yourself. Bring a secondary identity category to the surface for one meeting or an entire workday. What do you notice about your relationships at work? Relationships between others?
- Build a new relationship. How often do you walk by the people you see every day and politely smile, say "good morning," or perhaps say nothing at all? Who is that person you work with? Create opportunities for conversation to get to know them.
- Learn about unconscious bias and how to minimize its impact. Categorical thinking is part of the brain's hardwiring. Building inclusion means overcoming deep-seated habits and developing new practices.

Diversity categories were a great way to identify differences and open conversations about the impact of difference at work. And, now we have outgrown them. Diversity understanding has evolved and requires awareness beyond boxes. Think outside the box to create an atmosphere in your firm that engages colleagues, retains talent, and promotes flexibility.

For more information and further reading on Diversity & Inclusion, visit our [online library](#).



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Liz is a PhD. candidate with expertise in multiculturalism in the contemporary United States. She brings targeted knowledge on the recent shifts in the U.S. demographics, changing global attitudes, and the impact this has on her clients. She partners with firms and organizations to devise diversity and inclusion strategies that fit both their values and goals.

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