Women Discussing Their Differences: A Promising Trend

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Imagine a room full of 200 women: African Americans, Latinas, Asians and Caucasians, working in the fields of banking, health, academia and electronics ... It is 10:30 am and after the opening remarks by the organizers of the event, an instant polling exercise provides a picture of the women in the room — their professional background, their levels of income, their race and ethnic identification... Three speakers — a Latina, an African American and an Asian, and a multicultural panel present throughout the day, but the highlight of the meeting is the same-race and mixed-race/ethnic groups where women engage in candid dialogue prompted by the following questions:

- *"To advance in the workplace, what are the differences within our racial-ethnic group that we need to explore more deeply?"*
- *"What specific issues/barriers face our racial/ethnic group in the workplace?"*
- *"A difficult question we want to ask of one other group, but are afraid to is..."*

The small group discussions culminate in a 45-minute "town hall" meeting moderated by a well-known African American TV anchor woman. And a reception at the end of the day provides a fitting closure for networking and celebrating the day's hard work.

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In the last three months we have actively participated and been invited to several major conferences that bring women of color together to dialogue, network and develop skills and strategies to enhance their advancement and organizational contributions.[1] These conferences respond to a pressing need for working women to come together in new forums. They also represent an important trend towards cross-race and ethnic dialogue in the workplace that warrants encouragement and further discussion. As Sunita Chaudhuri, a JP Morgan Chase attendee in New York said, "I came out so energized because I understood how much we are in this together and how much synergy and energy you can create when you interact with others outside your own racial-ethnic group."

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What is the purpose of meetings such as these and why are we seeing more of these events organized and filled to capacity throughout the country? As a Latina and an African-American woman, we were instrumental in organizing one of these conferences: "Professional Women of Color: Patterns in the Tapestry of Difference," co-sponsored by *Working Mother* Media, the Center for Gender in Organizations and the Simmons School of Management at Simmons College in Boston.[2] In this article, we share our experiences and learning by providing an overview of what these conferences are about, discussing why they are needed, noting important dynamics that affect the discussions at these conferences and identifying some of the conditions that support their success.

An Overview
In the last 50 years women have and have not come a long way in the U.S. workplace. Women now make 76 cents to the dollar of men and their participation in professional managerial roles has increased from four percent in the early 1970s to almost 50 percent today. Women have entered occupations that were previously closed to them and though women CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations can still be counted on one hand, women now occupy 12 percent of board room seats and make up 16 percent of corporate officers.

However, these statistics are misleading. When we differentiate "the generic woman" from women of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, we see a very different view of women's lives in today's organizations. The latest data on the economic status of women reveals some of these differences. In 1999, white women earned 70 cents to the dollar of white men; African American women — 62 cents; Native American women — 57 cents; and Latinas — 52 cents. Only Asian American women earned more than white women — 75 cents to the dollar.[3] While white women represent 39 percent of the professional and managerial ranks, African-American women represent 30 percent and Latinas only 23 percent. The percentage of Latina corporate officers in the Fortune 500 is a minuscule .24 percent (25 out of a total of more than 10,000).[4] Only 21 Latinas serve on boards of Fortune 1,000 companies. It is not such a hushed comment in many circles that the gains of "women" are really the gains of white women — the "whitewash dilemma."[5]

Scholars now acknowledge that the search for a unified woman's agenda or "a woman's voice" is elusive. Instead, there are many voices, because race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and class, do make a difference in terms of which women advance and how far they advance in or out of the corporation. While white women talk of the "glass ceiling," African-American women experience the "concrete ceiling," and Latinas the "sticky floor."

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There are other and more subtle examples of how differences among women make a difference in the daily practices at work and why we need to address these differences in order to better accomplish our jobs and make more gains for all women in organizations. For example, a Latina team leader confronts her white superior with her lack of responsiveness to an important communication. The boss closes the door to her office in anger and cautions the Latina "to not get too uppity." An "up and coming," young African-American woman wonders if older African Americans in the organization resent her success and whether they will want to mentor her — will the strong community value "lifting as you climb" be upheld? An Asian-American woman puzzles over the informal feedback she has received from her manager. He praises her technical competence, but questions whether she is ready to take on a more visible leadership role because she is often perceived by her colleagues as "too quiet."

A Native-American woman notes that "it is a challenge to integrate our strong traditional values and balance that with the corporate culture... values that are very different. I have to ensure that my Native-American values, such as respect for our elders and children, are maintained."[6] A white woman wonders "what to say to connect to my women of color sisters that isn't stereotypical, that does not presume something about them, but doesn't make me look like a jackass, to be quite frank."

These differences, based on our membership in different racial-ethnic groups, impact us in two major ways: 1) in our life and work opportunities as the data on differential economic compensations points out; and 2) in our self-image. By this we mean that many times women of color react to those stereotypes or internalize

them and have the additional task of addressing the everyday "microaggressions" that hinder their advancement, their networking and mentoring opportunities, and their ability to be seen as successful leaders and contributors.[7] Others may decide to leave corporations altogether to become their own bosses. [8]

Thus, it seems that women need to come together to use their collective power to change the system that does not necessarily work for all women equally. And in order to use their collective power women will have to face their differences and challenge the dominant cultural assumption that the best way to connect with others is to focus solely on similarities. It is comfortable to find the places where our lives and experiences overlap. But in order to achieve power, support each other and make our organizations better and more effective, we are going to have to move beyond our similarities to also discuss the areas where our work lives sharply diverge from one another, which is a much more challenging discourse to support.[9]

Why Hold These Conferences?
Why should organizations support women of color coming together with each other and with their white counterparts to work with their differences? There are a number of concrete reasons why organizations are paying attention to the concerns and experiences of women of color. First, our growing presence in the corporate sector is one driving force of this increased attention. Of the 68 million women in the U.S. workforce, 19 million are of color. Five million women of color in the U.S. are managers and other professionals.[10]

A second driver is the need to build and retain a bench of talent and leadership in today's complex organizations. Once women of color enter the corporate arena, how are they supported, developed to advance to positions of leadership as well as retained? These are questions that more and more organizations are beginning to ask.

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A third factor driving the interest in women of color is the importance of diversity in relation to team work, quality of work and organizational learning — all hallmarks of successful organizations in today's competitive environment. Gail Snowden, Vice-President of the Boston Foundation notes, "We see so much work being done in teams. But if people are operating from stereotypes, this gets in the way of doing good business."

Finally, there are also negative consequences when organizations fail to adequately deal with the concerns and issues of women of color in their workforce. For example, last year, out of more than 81,000 employment discrimination charges that the Equal Employment Commission received, the two most frequent were race based (35 percent) and sex/gender based (30 percent). It is women of color who most often confront both issues"[11]

Important Dynamics that Affect Conversations Across Differences
There are a number of underlying factors and undercurrents that accompany conversations across differences in these types of conferences. We believe it is important to highlight several of these key factors because awareness of the dynamics that accompany conversations across gender, race and ethnicity allows people who orchestrate these conversations to plan them more effectively.

The first issue is that the dominance of race in our experiences as women differs across diverse racial and ethnic groups, let alone individuals. White women and women of color often begin at very different places as we enter these conversations. White women consistently report that they are less likely to think in terms of their race — as opposed to their gender — in the workplace.[12] In contrast, women of color view the

conferences as a prime space to have candid conversations about how race is impacting their career experiences. As we encourage conversations across difference, we need to consider the stance of participants as they enter and to acknowledge that they will be at different places in their interest and willingness to talk about race and ethnicity as a primary factor that influences their work and lives.

Another common dynamic that we see in these conversations is that social differences are often reduced to a black-white discourse that makes all other ethnic groups invisible. This false dichotomy leaves no room for understanding Latinas in organizations, for example, which requires considering language, cultural differences and citizenship. It also makes it hard to fully include Asian and Native-American women. Even in a room of women of color, Native-American and Asian women can feel invisible and their voices are not given the same weight. Their words feel reminiscent of our own experience at women's conferences where we were asked, as women of color, to table our concerns because they took us away from our agenda as "women." We don't want this dynamic to be reproduced in these conferences, thus, paying attention to processes and ways of speaking that allow each ethnic group to be fully present is crucial.

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Another important underlying pattern that hinders these types of conversations across difference is the dynamics of denial, accusation and confession, that lead to eventual disconnect.[13] Narratives of *denial*, which emphasize female unity and similarities, suggest that all disadvantage stems from the primacy of gender. These narratives, produced mostly by white women, implicitly deny the significance of race in social relations by focusing solely on gender. The statement "We are all women, aren't we?" is an example of this kind of narrative.

Accusation, mostly produced by women of color, follows denial and is a response to the way white women privilege gender as the category of analysis. Narratives of accusation demand that white women acknowledge their power in a racist system that privileges being white. Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I a woman?" [14] represents this position. Her question points out the way in which the very definition of womanhood was already coded as white.

Confession usually follows denial and accusation. Confessions are largely produced by white women in response to the accusations of women of color which make racial privilege visible and disturbing to them. "Oh, yes, you are right; I am a racist and tell me more," conveys the tone of this response, but nothing changes. Denial, accusation and confession lead to a dead end, brought about by women getting caught in the moves of confession and accusation, while their anger, guilt and shame remain very much hidden.

To move women out of this bind, we need to use our own experience of advantage and disadvantage as a bridge to understand, empathize and communicate with the other. Recognizing the complexity of our own identities, allows us to connect with others, both as advantaged and disadvantaged, thus breaking this cycle of mutual disempowerment. However, feeling pain and shame can't be avoided and it is difficult to stay with those feelings at least long enough that the other recognizes our deep recognition of their struggle and their difference from us. Acknowledging this pain, hurt and shame seems to be a condition for both women of color and white women to deepen their dialogue across differences.

Skills and Conditions that Support Successful Engagement Across Differences
As we planned our conference in Boston, we found that there were several conditions that supported the success of our endeavor. These conditions ranged from being thoughtful about how we attracted women to

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participate to the questions we asked them throughout the day. Following are some of the best practices we have identified for convening these types of conferences.

- *Ensure Diverse Representation at the Conference*
  To ensure that we had a group of participants that represented the diverse perspectives and experiences of women in the Boston metropolitan area, we issued invitations to diverse communities through advertising in publications, announcements on radio stations serving diverse markets, and reaching out to leaders and gatekeepers in those communities. We were also clear that we wanted the conference to have representation of members of all different groups in proportions that did not leave any one member of the conference feeling like a token. Thus, in Boston, we set goals for the different groups proportional to their numbers in our geographic area. What this meant is that we limited the number of spaces that we allocated to white women and African American women to ensure that we had spaces available for Latinas, Asians and Native-American women, who are usually less represented numerically. And we reached out to our corporate sponsors to support this goal.

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- *Extend an Authentic and Inclusive Conference Invitation and Welcome*
  We also paid close attention to the structure of the activities in which we asked participants to engage. Even though participants self select in these voluntary conferences, they still enter the conversation with a measure of concern and anxiety at facing the challenge of discussing issues that have for the most part been "undiscussable" in the workplace. Questions abound as participants take their seats at the start of the conference. Women of color may be asking themselves, "Will I be heard, or will this be yet another place where I am invisible?" For white women and men who attend, the question may be, "What do I have to add to this conversation as a white person or a man? Am I just going to be cast as the oppressor?"

  Women who have been involved in these private conversations for years may enter the conference with some skepticism. "Are we going to hear the same tired scripts that surface when we talk about differences in organizations? How is this conversation going to be different?" All of these questions raise issues of trust, vulnerability, risk and fear. As we ask participants to engage with one another across racial and ethnic differences, we are in fact asking them to trust one another, to take risks, to share vulnerabilities and to transcend their fear.

  One method we found effective in opening the way to meaningful and candid conversation is to start by asking people to identify their own racial and ethnic identity so that others could know them better. This practice allowed participants to name their own identity first and to share information that would normally be inaccessible. We also spent considerable time crafting the questions we asked attendees to answer in the small group discussions as honest, non-defensive answers would encourage a deeper dialogue and provide the foundation for the rest of the day's discussions.

- *Offer a Framework of Skills to Support the Conference*
  A third element that supported the day's dialogue was promoting a framework of dialogue and a set of skills to engage in it. In Boston, the following skills were emphasized from the beginning: inquiring, disclosing and asking difficult questions. We find that each of these is a complex skill in itself. For

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example, there is a tendency to assume that white women, as members of the privileged racial group will provide the "inquiry" and women of color, as members in the disadvantaged group, will provide the "disclosing." This dynamic will not be helpful to cross-race-ethnic dialogue; all women need to both inquire and disclose in a give and take that results in mutual learning.

The skill of asking difficult questions refers to a process through which individuals use inquiry as a method for inviting others to consider basic assumptions that are generating misunderstanding, ignorance and/or conflict.[15] In this context, asking a difficult question means asking a question that is difficult for a member of our own group to ask of another group, not one that we think will be difficult for the other to answer. These are embarrassing questions: they show our own ignorance about the other group; they require that we surface what is usually kept silent; they make us feel vulnerable. In Boston, some of these questions were:

○ "What persona does each group feel they have to take on in the workplace in order to effectively combat stereotypes?"
○ "Why are the passion and enthusiasm of women of color perceived as threatening to white people?"
○ "Under what conditions will you stand and support me, and be an advocate for me?"
○ "Why do you feel threatened by our group's success as Asians?"
○ "Why don't white women own the power they have as gatekeepers?"

- *Provide Skilled and Adept Support at the Conference*
  Part of the promise and risk of convening conferences such as these is that there will be charged conversations. That is, conversations are likely to be accompanied by a degree of emotion. For example, in one of the early women of color town hall meetings, conveners could not have planned for the fact that a group of women of color were not ready to return to the lunch discussion at the scheduled time. More rigid conference planners may have tried to push the women to return to the larger group and stay on schedule rather than acknowledge the intensity of emotions that emerged from the same-race gathering and respect the group's need to debrief their experience and prepare themselves to return to the plenary. Sensitive, adept facilitators allowed us to move past this charged situation and join the next conversation across racial-ethnic groups.

  In addition, the conferences we have attended have all included speakers from different racial/ethnic groups who were able to give real-time examples and practices from their experiences of engaging and working across differences in their organizations. For many participants, these conferences represent one of the few opportunities where they can sit and learn from other prominent and successful women who look like them.

In Closing
The women of color conferences we have described pose a challenge that is exciting and worth pursuing. We frequently hear participants comment, "This is such a rare opportunity. When do I get a chance to get together with a group of so many people and many of them are people of color?"

There is another challenge that we face as a result of these conferences: how do we take these conversations

to the next level? How do we take the learning and skills back to the workplace so it can make a real difference in the work lives of women of different backgrounds? While we are beginning to see interest in some companies to sponsor their own internal conferences or in women of color employee groups addressing some of their own differences so that they can have a stronger and more differentiated voice as women of color in their organizations, these are initial efforts that suggest there are many more conversations that must continue after one of these conferences is held.

Thus, while we are not proposing that women of color conferences become the latest "diversity fix," we want to underscore that these conferences serve a number of important functions: they are an oasis, an opportunity for women to come together, recharge and reclaim their full and differentiated identity as working women. They are a forum for raising the importance, the visibility and the differences in the situation of women of color in the corporate arena. They are a laboratory, providing a space for women (and men) of all hues to practice talking with one another about their differences and similarities. And they are a beacon to the future, as successful women and men share their own best practices for reaching their potential as individuals and leaders in their organizations.

Endnotes

1. For example, women (and men) have or will gather for:

- *Working Mother's* Best Companies for Women of Color Summit in 2002, 2003 and 2004, in New York;
- Spelman College's "Women of Color Leadership in the 21st Century: It's our Turn" Leadership Symposium and Conference in Atlanta;
- Multicultural Town Halls in Boston and Chicago, part of *Working Mother's* Best Companies for Women of Color initiative; and
- Summit for Women of Color Administrators and Faculty in Higher Education entitled "Validating Our Strengths: Exercising Leadership through Participation and Achievement," sponsored by the American Council on Education's Center for Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity and Office of Women in Higher Education and Brown University.

2. Many others were responsible for the success of this conference, most notably, Jodi DeLibertis, Tara Hudson and Bridgette Sheridan, of the Center for Gender in Organizations; Carol Evans, Luci Knight, Carmen Nieves and Betty Spence, of *Working Mother* Media; and Deborah Merrill Sands, Acting Dean of the Simmons School of Management. We also thank the panelists, attendees, speakers, sponsors, and the staff and Advisory Group of Simmons College, who made the conference possible. Finally we thank Ella E.Bell, Chair of the Advisory Board of *Working Mother* Best Companies for Women of Color Initiative, for her vision and leadership of the women of color conferences.
3. Caiazza, A., Shaw, A., and Werschkul, M., "Women's Economic Status in the States: Wide Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Religion," Washington, DC: The Institute for Women's Policy Research.
4. Catalyst, "Latinas in the Workplace: What Managers Need to Know," 2003, p 2, New York.
5. Betters-Reed, B. and Moore, L. 1995. "Shifting the Management and Development Paradigm for Women," *Journal of Management Development*, 14(2): pgs 24-38.
6. Many of the quotes in this article are taken from the group reports of the Women of Color Conferences in NY and Boston. The authors have chosen to maintain anonymity in order to protect confidentiality.
7. See for example, Blake-Beard, S., 2001. CGO *Insights #10* , "Mentoring Relationships through the Lens of Race and Gender." Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations, and Blake-Beard, S. and Morgan Roberts, L., Forthcoming 2004. CGO *Commentaries #4*, "The Haunting Reality of Reality TV: Releasing the Double-Blind of Visibility in the Workplace." Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.
8. For example, Latinas are the fastest growing group of business owners in the country: Latina-owned business grew 206 percent between 1987 and 1996, compared to 47 percent for all the businesses, according to the U.S. Census Bureau study. "HACR Corporate Best Practices: 2002 Hispanic Workforce." Washington, DC: Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility.
9. See, for example Holvino, E. and Sheridan, B., 2003. CGO *Insights #17*,"Working Across Differences: Diversity Practices for Organizational Change." Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations; Cumming, J. and Holvino, E., 2003. CGO *Insights #19*, "Enhancing Working Across Differences with the Problematic Moment Approach," Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations; and Sheridan, B., Holvino, E., and Debebe, G., 2004. CGO *Commentaries #3*,"Beyond Diversity: Working Across Differences for Organizational Change." Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.
10. Bureau of Labor Statistics, cited in Howard, C., 2004."Can we Talk?" *Working Mother*, June: pg 66.
11. Di Tulio, A. and Padagano, T., 2004. "Diversity at Work." *Working Mother*, June: pg 49.
12. Howard, C., op. cit. See also McRae, M., 2004. CGO *Commentaries #2*, "How Do I Talk to You, My White Sister?" Boston: Center for Gender in Organization.
13. Friedman, S., "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse." *Signs*, 21: pgs 1-49; and Holvino, E., Forthcoming 2004. CGO *Commentaries #5*, "Women in Organizations: Why our Differences Matter," Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.
14. Truth, S., 1851. "Women's Rights." In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.),*Words of Fire:An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, 1995. New York: The New Press, p 36.
15. Proudford, K., CGO *Insights #14*, "Asking the Question: Uncovering the Assumptions that Undermine Conversations Across Race." Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.