



## Beyond Diversity

*It's time to move past diversity to plenitude. Here's how.*

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

**D**iversity has taken center stage in the minds of many nonprofit leaders. But there's another trend—one that begins with diversity but goes far beyond it—which will transform the way nonprofits work.

This new trend is called plenitude—a term coined by Grant McCracken in *Plenitude 2.0*. He defines plenitude as the “diversity of diversity,” in which the complete range of conceivable variation is expressed. In other words, we ain't seen nuthin' yet.

### Diversity Is Passé

Most nonprofits have made attempts to diversify their staff and board or at least to become more “inclusive.” Some have reached their goals. Many others have merely established a kinder, gentler tokenism.

The rush toward diversity is for the most part a Caucasian preoccupation. If you look at the demographics, it's clear that the situation will soon resolve itself anyway (in 50 years over half the U.S. population will be non-Caucasian).

For the interim, we've spawned what we might call a “diversity establishment.” Diversity consultants abound. Most of their focus is on “communities” of color, disability, or affectional preference. Diversity trainers do a respectable job of illus-

trating the needs of these populations. Yet, for even these erudite diversity practitioners, the game is changing rapidly and fundamentally.

### New Tribes Are Emerging

Years ago, in *We Talk, You Listen—New Tribes, New Turf*, Vine Deloria, Jr., presaged the replacement of melting-pot ideals with what we now call diversity. He noted that this emphasis on diversity is merely the first wave in a world of new tribes and new turf.

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These emerging “tribes” are different from groups of the past. We can't identify them in the old ways—by nationality, religion, age, gender, or race. They are largely transparent in the greater society. They're your co-workers, your neighbors, your relatives, bonded together because of Internet contacts, media preferences, information sources, and other affiliations. They bear no

outward distinction. Yet, given the right impetus, their tribal “colors” can quickly manifest themselves, perhaps to others' astonishment.

Some tribes will build enclaves, much as the Amish insulate themselves from the larger society. They may do so, as the Amish do, to freeze their culture in a world they feel is moving too fast. Or they may do so because they feel the rest of society is not moving fast enough. But their new “turf” may not be geographical—or even bounded by what we now recognize as a community. Instead, each tribe will be defined by its core belief system.

### Is This the End of Tradition?

The decline of hierarchy complicates our social world. The fracturing of social anchors of family, place, and politics has opened the way for plenitude. Media and computer connectivity have put new tribes on the fast track.

Plenitude is certain to drive ideologists to distraction. Some will face increasing challenges if they continue to envision a one-size-fits-all society. Others will have their own problems explaining why they classify a Native American pow-wow—but not a country-western square dance—as a form



of diversity. Does a culture qualify as “diverse” only when it’s at odds with the mainstream? What qualifies as “mainstream” nowadays anyway?

The mistake both sides of our political spectrum make is to intellectually freeze a cultural point in time by labeling it “traditional.” Cultures are both evolution-dynamic and time-dynamic. They are built upon successive layers of sociopolitical epochs. Please, at what point should any culture stop evolving? Are we the tragic victims of our own self-definitions?

Many, for example, have trouble shucking the largely mythological view of the “traditional” American family. The 1950’s television images of “Father Knows Best” and “Leave It To Beaver” weren’t reality then, much less now. Yet many nonprofits and their funders strive to recreate mythical visions of family and community. While honoring the past, we mustn’t take what we think we know about ourselves so seriously that we disable our own cultural evolution. Otherwise, there’s no real future in store—only the past repeated again and again.

There’s no need to worry that plenitude will force all former ideals about “tradition” out of circulation. Plenitude in fact, promises increasing avenues for revisiting historical traditions and trying them on for size in a modern world. Will we see “New Victorians” along with our other ethnocentric tribes? Undoubtedly. We’ll have fertile ground for inventing new “ancient” traditions and for launching more cultural evolutions. Plenitude will not sustain stasis anywhere.

### **What Can Nonprofits Do?**

The concern many of us will have with plenitude is that it chal-

## **Be Ready to Move Beyond Diversity: Action Steps to Take Now**

- Invest in technology to help create in-depth relationships with your stakeholders.
- Using the Internet, do extensive research into the mores of whatever group you hope to reach.
- Create a Web site to let people know about your mission, values, and organizational culture.
- Clearly define the group your organization seeks to serve. Don’t be too broad or vague.
- On your Web site, post answers to frequently-asked questions about your organization that will help clarify your core purpose.
- Develop systems that encourage people to understand and respect their differences.
- Be careful about categorizing people according to current demographics of nationality, religion, age, gender, or race. Young people are especially resistant to these old monolithic identifiers. But older people, too, are redefining themselves according to affinity group or belief system rather than the old demographics.
- Use the Internet to track the attitudes and cultures of other nonprofit organizations.
- Take time to educate people about your organization’s culture and belief system.

lenges nonprofits’ most fundamental ideas of social and political association. What becomes of the “common good” in a society that seems not to have much in common anymore? What happens to “community” when it fills up with new tribes and new turf? How can we hope to resolve conflict and act in concert when we have so many tribal cultures? Are we observing the end of commonality?

The truth is that those old canons of community and association are already outdated. Despite the wishful

thinking of social planners mired in chamber-of-commerce paradigms, physical neighborhoods and “communities” are increasingly places for the fulfillment of sleep rather than attachment and affiliation. Likewise, many workplaces are just for work, despite managers’ efforts to promote loyal employee “teams.”

Nonprofit organizations will need to redefine such terms as “community” and “stakeholder.” There will be plenty of contention over who nonprofits’ “real” stakeholders are. Many nonprofits have enough problems already with stakeholder questions. For example, does choosing one stakeholder mean forsaking others? Is that necessarily bad? Should the organization serve all comers or refine a niche market? Unless the

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nonprofit mission was organized around a very specific mission, the tendency is to succumb to “stakeholderitis.” Some nonprofits try to be all things to all people and hence are not much to not many. Plenitude will make this non-strategic non-tactic increasingly unwise, if not impossible.

The oncoming plethora of tribal identifiers will make our current view of diversity look like the primary pigments in a box of crayons. Multitudes of cultures will occupy both terrapace and cyber-space. Nonprofit leaders will need to explore the subtleties of this new abundance. Or they’ll need to have someone do it for them.

Woe to the nonprofit that doesn’t do its research on the nuances of whatever micro-culture it seeks to cultivate. Nonprofit executives may need to hire anthropologists, sociologists, or roving ambassadors to help them navigate this new social matrix. Perhaps a new role for diversity trainers will be to serve as diplomatic agents, go-betweens, interpreters, facilitators, match-makers, and mediators for federations, collaborations, and joint ventures in the greater community.

Nonprofits will also need to make better use of computers. They will need to harness the latest technology to gather information to form relationships with stakeholders. They will need to use the Internet to track attitudes, mores, and cultural nuances.

### **Nonprofits Can Lead the Way**

More than any other sector of our society, nonprofits are the source of plenitude. Organizing around cul-

tural, political, environmental, intellectual, ethnic, and a host of other special interests and missions, nonprofits are the progenitors of emerging tribes. More than the increasingly irrelevant government sector, nonprofits are the fermentational source of social evolution.

It’s in nonprofits’ best interests to create organizational cultures that encourage tribalism. At the micro-level, nonprofits want to make people feel part of their exclusive “tribe” or “club” of cause-related people. At the macro-level, the “rub” comes in how nonprofits will function among all these tribes, affiliations, and special interests that they themselves have created. How can nonprofits set up systems to tell outsiders about their mission, values, and organizational culture—beyond those too often un-descriptive mission “statements”?

One answer is the FAQ, which gives nonprofits a chance to answer the most “frequently asked questions” of visitors to its Web site. The many tribes on the Internet rely on FAQs to learn the mores, attitudes, and insider jargon of a nonprofit—a look at the organizational culture they couldn’t receive any other way.

Another answer may be to cultivate a new form of civility. Plenitude will make it increasingly difficult, for some, to communicate across tribal cultures. We often find ourselves defending our new affiliational preferences against another culture. That is simply part of the allure of joining a tribe. Yet, mistrust, apprehension, and even fear may be generated both ways. Hence, we too often become hypersensitive to slights “disrespecting” our tribe. Often, these perceived slights occur more from ignorance

than from intention. Being too touchy is not a viable survival skill for any of us. We must develop our ability to suffer others’ ignorance of our tribal culture until we can educate them about it. We must be advisers, not sentries. Developing protocols under which all can agree to operate can provide a starting point. Nonprofits, with their intertribal connections, can be the best incubators of such a model—and it’s not too early to start.

As our social species multiply, we continue to have something in common. The comforting news for those concerned about the turbulence of plenitude is that we are still creative, adaptive, social beings. Despite the fumbling mechanizations of out-of-step government bodies and ivory-tower social planners, we continue to be self-organizing. Nonprofits have long been our best instigators for self-organization. We will continue to rethink, reshape, and re-evolve our cultures. For better or worse, our future holds fermentation and evolution. ■

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations’ Resource Center, 608-274-9777.

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