



Putting Our Differences to Work

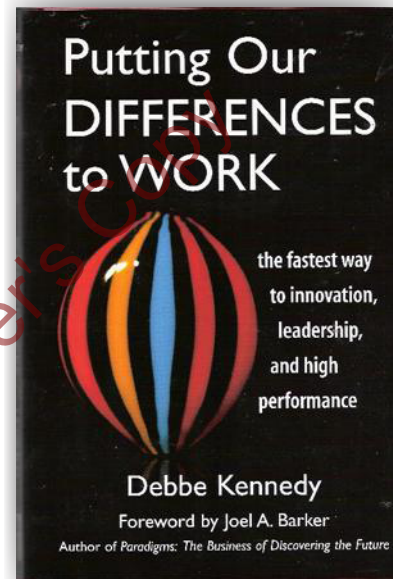
The Fastest Way to Innovation, Leadership and High Performance

Debbe Kennedy

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Reviewed by Amity Noltemeyer

INTRODUCTION

Putting differences to work – creating an environment where diverse individuals can work more effectively to drive innovation and performance – has unlimited potential benefits. Unfortunately, however, organizations often overlook these differences, failing to tap into the wealth of insight that could improve innovation and outcomes in a mutualistic process.

In **Putting Our Differences to Work**, author Debbe Kennedy seeks to provide a practical guide that will facilitate putting differences to work within any organization. To this end, she introduces the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership and a six-step road map to guide the way. Through her writing, Kennedy extends the invitation to all leaders to join her in ush-

ering in a new era in which business and society are transformed by creating inclusive cultures and capitalizing on differences.

TAKING YOUR LEADERSHIP TO A NEW LEVEL

Despite the profound benefits accrued by putting differences to work, individuals and organizations often fail to do so. Why does this struggle between sameness and difference exist? In his book *Grow or Die*, author George Ainsworth-Land proposes that all beings grow in a three stage pattern. In the first stage – seeking love, food, and security – individuals are focused on their own survival. In the second stage, beginning around adolescence, individuals begin to seek out others like themselves. These similarities are advantageous as they facilitate cooperative accom-

plishments, communication, decision-making and predictability. Finally, in the third stage – referred to as **mutualism** – individuals open the door to innovation by connecting with diverse combinations of others. At this stage, there are two pathways: one in which sameness is rewarded and the other in which differences are valued. Given that innovation is driven by diversity, the latter path – although it may be more difficult – is preferable.

Although valuing differences is ideal, some organizations become stuck in the comfort zone of valuing sameness. Kennedy proposes seven “telling signs” that an organization values sameness over differences: (1) the leadership team lacks diversity, (2) old notions and prejudices still exist and are left unchallenged, (3) efforts are fragmented and lack collaboration or ideas from “outsiders,” (4) people who are different are rarely hired, promoted, or included, (5) new ideas are subtly shunned or altogether ignored, (6) the words value diversity but the actions do not, and (7) diversity is dismissed as a human resource issue. Organizations that want to transcend level of sameness to put their differences to work do not need to acquire completely new sets of skills; rather, they must simply learn to refocus, reshape habits, and apply previously acquired skills.

In particular, Kennedy posits that **Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership** – “stretching lessons” which invite readers to focus on how they think, operate, and behave – are required to put differences to work. These qualities, which are designed to complement previously acquired leadership knowledge, have the potential to enhance leadership, achievement, interpersonal connection, and influence. The Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership are:

1. *Makes diversity an organizational priority*- Although organizations typically condition their employees to believe statements such as “let’s put our differences aside,” or, “we are more alike than different,” these beliefs result in ignoring valuable – and potentially advantageous – differences. Because differences can stimulate novel ideas and thinking, resulting in higher innovation, it is important to create an environment where differences are welcomed and used to facilitate success.
2. *Gets to know people and their differences*- Conscious-

KEY CONCEPTS

Kennedy identifies Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership that are essential for putting differences to work:

1. *Make diversity an organizational priority*- Create an environment where differences are welcomed and used to facilitate success.
2. *Get to know people and their differences*-Consciously develop a curiosity and knowledge for tapping into differences.
3. *Enable rich communication*- Broaden traditional notions of two-way communication and place increased value on what others have to say.
4. *Hold personal responsibility as a core value*- Support the development of personal responsibility in oneself and others.
5. *Establish mutualism as the final arbiter*- *Mutual dependence* – where there are all winners and no losers - is a prerequisite for social and organizational well-being.



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ly develop a curiosity and knowledge for tapping into differences. Understand how they can be used to stimulate new thinking and innovation.

3. *Enables rich communication*- Broaden traditional notions of two-way communication to include more complex collaboration, perhaps using technology to enrich communication. Also, place an enhanced level of value on what others have to say and listen carefully for better ideas.
4. *Holds personal responsibility as a core value*- A sense of personal responsibility must be consciously ingrained in one's mindset, and frequently practiced, so that positive outcomes can emerge when action calls. In addition, it is important to support, encourage, and acknowledge the development of personal responsibility in others.
5. *Establishes mutualism as the final arbiter*- Mutual dependence – where there are all winners and no losers – is a prerequisite for social and organizational well-being.

Although the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership are not complex, they will require effort, practice, and conviction to live on a daily basis. They may seem awkward to operationalize initially, but over time will become a natural way of doing things. Because changing old habits and routines can be daunting, Kennedy proposes several basic tools for putting differences to work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbe Kennedy is founder, president, and CEO of the Leadership Solutions Companies. Her company specializes in custom leadership and virtual communications solutions. In 2004, she launched the company's Global Dialogue Center, a virtual gathering place focusing on leadership, professional, and personal development. Kennedy is also a well-known author, virtual speaker, and master problem-solver.

Six Steps

At the request of leaders for a clear action plan for putting differences to work, Kennedy developed a six step process. This model – which is a perpetual cycle of action – applies whether a change initiative has just begun or is well-ingrained in a system. It is represented visually by an imperfect circle, to symbolize the unpredictable and complex realities of any change process. The six steps are:

1. *Assessment*: defining current realities
2. *Acceptance*: developing support for change
3. *Action*: moving forward
4. *Accountability*: establishing shared ownership
5. *Achievement*: measuring process and celebrating success
6. *More Action*: keeping momentum alive.

Each of these steps is explored in-depth in the second section of the book, along with real-world examples to illustrate their principles.

...there is really nothing particularly complex about putting our differences to work. However, it does call for us to operate and think differently.

First, Kennedy recommends developing an **Organizational Snapshot**, or reference point for putting differences to work. This snapshot, which is based on personal knowledge and gut feelings, takes only minutes to create and can produce priceless information and insights. It is not intended to “sell” the need for change to others, but rather to serve as a personal strategy room to reveal areas of need.

To create an Organizational Snapshot, Kennedy recommends evaluating the organization along critical areas necessary for creating a diverse and inclusive environment. For example, Kennedy provides a description of the following domains: leadership, culture, involvement, business, strategy/measures, and staffing/development). When considering each of these domains independently, select a number from 1 to 10 that represents your organization's level of effectiveness and plot the snapshot visually using a line graph.

Kennedy then identifies three operating principles that exist across all six steps of the Putting Our Differences to Work Model. These principles have the potential to maximize success at each step.

1. *Mark your starting point*- At each step, take an organizational snapshot to serve as a reference point. Later, follow up with another snapshot to monitor progress and celebrate successes.
2. *Be willing to jump into the middle of what's going on*- There is never a better time to begin the process of putting differences to work, and it is important to jump into the action at each of the six steps.
3. *Be prepared to work a parallel path*- It is important to work two paths simultaneously: (1) the visible path, and (2) the behind the scenes path, which uses influence and inspiration to facilitate success.

...all leaders hold a responsibility to think - to be in a constant state of questioning and adjusting direction. Regularly creating organizational snapshots is one leadership tool to help you fulfill this responsibility.

In their desire to communicate and connect with others, there are three pitfalls that leaders often face. First, leaders often talk *at* people rather than *with* them. These leaders may purposely communicate impersonally because they erroneously perceive personal communication as a weakness. Second, leaders sometimes say what they want with little regard for what employees want to hear. It is important to find out what information is relevant for employees. Finally, leaders talk too much from the head and too little from the heart. They use jargon and buzz words as a shelter, resulting in a weak or absent emotional connection.

KNOWLEDGE AND KNOW-HOW TO GUIDE THE WAY

As previously mentioned, Kennedy proposed a six-step model for putting differences to work. In the second section of her book, she expands upon each step, providing leaders with information, examples, and practical recommendations.

Step 1- Assessment: Defining Current Realities

Upon initial reflection, self-assessment may not seem like an enjoyable task. However, it is actually liberating to uncover where one is and what challenges may exist ahead. Self-assessment does more than simply keep individuals and organizations out of trouble and it involves more than simply delegating it to others or checking it off the to-do list. When integrated into daily practice, self-reflection also serves as a catalyst for powerful ideas and innovations. In addition, it helps keep individuals and organizations focused, builds confidence, and celebrates progress.

In order for self-assessment to be most productive, Kennedy suggests three tactical ideas. First, it is important to **examine organizational values**. For example, consider whether the organizational values have been examined recently, are manifested in individuals and organizations, are talked about, and are well-known. Second, **discuss the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership**, what they mean, where your strengths and weaknesses lie, and an action plan for moving forward. This discussion can occur via a blog, forum, or face-to-face conversation. Finally, **assess who is on board and who is skeptical of putting differences to work** in the organization. Regarding the latter, identify their influence on others and how the organization may be inadvertently rewarding their behavior with attention. Then, talk with them to try to negotiate the development of new habits.

Self-assessment – an essential component of change – requires leaders to be astutely aware of their organization. It can be a simple process ingrained into daily functioning, and ultimately serves as a pedestal from which all bold decisions are made.

Step 2- Acceptance: Developing Support for Change

According to Kennedy, the most critical success factor in leading change is acceptance. Unfortunately, fostering acceptance is often overlooked, avoided, or outright ignored. Gaining acceptance for putting differences to work involves actions such as igniting an interest to lead in everyone, opening people's minds to valuing differences in others, creating new ways of working together, giving people the opportunity

to learn and practice the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership, and helping people to see the benefits of differences.

Again, there are several tactical ideas to help operationalize acceptance. First, **change the experience of sameness**. Identify ways to integrate differences into the workplace such as inviting diverse participants to participate in a dialogue session, developing a multicultural advisory board, or ensuring more diverse representation on a management team. Second, **reinvent how you work together**. Invite individuals to decide how they will work together by developing a contract around the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership. In addition, **take an inventory of your differences**. Invite each team member to identify and share one or more differences they bring to the team, and use this to spark discussion about the value of these differences. Fourth, **have a compelling message**. Know exactly what you want and be able to communicate it powerfully and concisely. Finally, **meet people peer to peer**. Erase the distinction of boss and subordinate, state your case with confidence, and make the message exude passion and energy.

Step 3- Action: Moving Forward

Action is a mysterious paradox. It has precipitated every great accomplishment in our earth's history; however, even the most successful and ingenious leaders occasionally become stuck in a state of inaction. Although they may not discuss this with others, or even admit it to themselves, everyone has experienced a moment when doubt is overwhelming, courage dissipates, and the thought of postponing action is welcoming. Why are individuals sometimes drawn to inaction even when it is clear that taking action will result in benefits? Because although there is much to gain, there is also much to lose. Action requires risk of everyone.

There are three tactical ideas to facilitate action toward putting differences to work. First, **keep tactics simple**. Rather than develop elaborate plans – and face disappointment when they fail – focus on only two or three action-oriented goals, establish target dates for

completion, work effortfully to achieve them, and use success at these goals to boost confidence for future action. Second, **make it cool to get involved**. Model involvement and include others to communicate the importance of action. Finally, **learn to listen and trust**. A variety of formats can be utilized to meet this end including one-on-one or small-group conversations, social media (e.g., blogs, virtual meetings), and telephone lines offering anonymous and two-way replies.

Interestingly, the most critical success factor in leading change, the one that will create a culture that masters the art of putting differences to work, is often discounted, overlooked, avoided, or ignored - acceptance.

Step 4- Accountability: Establishing Shared Ownership

Despite the potential for accountability to transform talk to real action, individuals and organizations alike frequently shy away from the notion. If there is no expectation to deliver results, however, why should organizations even bother developing goals and plans? It is important to reframe accountability for valuing diversity and building inclusive cultures to recognize personal responsibility and shared ownership.

Kennedy provides three tactical ideas that can be used to facilitate accountability. First, **give the focus on people, clout, and influence**. It is useful to set expectations with specific people leadership objectives. Second, **integrate: eliminate the not-so-obvious inhibitor**. It is important to build accountability systems into the organizational culture, particularly if (1) the senior leadership team or board remains homogenous, (2) key positions are filled with “clones,” (3) when people with differences are hired, they are not provided with supportive sponsors, (4) people with differences are unintentionally overlooked for “inner circle” meetings, and (5) those in power seek to keep new perspectives from changing the status quo. Finally, **own the words and the vision**. The terms *diversity* and *inclusion* are often misinterpreted, so it is important to have employees collaboratively identify what they mean in the context of your organization.

Step 5- Achievement: Measuring Progress; Celebrating Success

Although most leaders recognize successes at the end of a journey, it is often more difficult to value smaller successes along the way. This paradigm needs to be transformed. Although there may not be enough time to linger on every small success, leaders need to begin at least recognizing them and revisiting them frequently to demonstrate progress.

Kennedy proposes three tactical ideas for measuring progress and celebrating success. First, **express your gratitude** for progress toward putting differences to work. This helps strengthen the goodness associated with joint achievement and helps recognize progress. Second, **celebrate in silence**. According to Kennedy, “The measurement of whether we have created a diverse, inclusive environment that puts our differences to work is often understood more by what is seen, felt, sensed and experienced than by numbers or words.” Celebrations that can be done in silence include smiling more, taking one minute to look around and feel gratitude for the community you are a part of, and thinking about how you have contributed to an inclusive environment and what you might do to help others do so. Finally, **let results speak for themselves**. Expand your understanding of “business measures” to include nontraditional measurements that reflect progress toward your goals (e.g., stories of leaders exemplifying the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership).

Accountability for creating a diverse, inclusive environment that effectively thrives on putting differences to work is an act of commitment. It reaches well beyond our talk and good intentions. It says we are expected to deliver.

Step 6- More Action: Keeping Momentum Alive

According to Kennedy, “Of all six steps that make up the putting our differences to work ‘perpetual cycle of action,’ more action is the step that breathes new life into the ongoing journey.” Rather than a destination, this step represents a gateway to the next phase of change. It involves reflection, refocusing, reevaluating, and recommitting to the actions that lie ahead.

At this phase, leaders within an organization begin to question themselves and use their awareness of putting differences to work to collaborate, connect, and renew the organization.

Three tactical ideas can support this step of the process. First, **build a new energy source team**. This cross-functional team should determine what strengths and weakness exist regarding putting differences to work, what needs to be done to revitalize involvement and commitment, and how to achieve this end. Second, **start a new conversation** to build acceptance and ownership. Even if this has been done previously, consider doing it again in a different setting, with a different approach, and with different questions. Finally, **refresh your approach and create a revitalized vision**. Attempt to reframe the mission in your own words, making it relevant to everyone’s roles.

EVER EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES

At this point in the book, author and futurist Joel Barker shares his reflections on innovation at the verge of differences. The term **verge**, which originated in the biological sciences, connotes “where something and something different meet.” Essentially, it is the meeting of differences, such as where two ecosystems meet. Barker was surprised to learn that – contrary to the popular belief instilled by the “survival of the fittest” theory – biological innovation often occurs at the verge rather than in the midst of competition. This idea makes intuitive sense, given that people would

be more likely to innovate at the edge of systems because they face less risk. Sure enough, many innovations come from individuals in one field developing an idea for another field.

But how does the process of verge innovation occur? Barker identified three patterns, based on examples of the phenomenon. First, he suggested the **Over “There” Approach**, where one system brings a development to another system. For example, inkjet technology has been brought from that industry to the housing industry where it has improved painting processes. Next is the **“Bring it Back” Approach**, where one system seeks out the innovation of another system and brings it back to improve their system.

For example, Toyota sought out the electric motor and battery experts and brought their technology to the automotive industry, where it led them to dominate the hybrid market. Finally, the third pattern is the **“New Territory” Approach**, which describes the act of creating a brand new territory by combining ideas or innovations. For example, Fed Ex chartered entirely new territory by combining small jet planes with local trucks in a smooth chain delivery system, something that had previously not been attempted.

The possibilities for innovation at the verge are endless. The challenge for leaders is to learn to scan their horizons for potential – sometimes surprising – combinations and collaborations of different talents, techniques, or technologies that might result in mutualistic innovations. It is important to schedule meetings with organizations in which a leader shares a verge in order to avoid overlooking this important task.

Kennedy follows up Barker’s thoughts on differences at the verge with her own ideas on the topic. She first learned about the topic from Barker some years back. Over time, the collaborative work between Kennedy and Barker expanded into a “mutualistic experiment.” Kennedy reached several conclusions over the years about this work. First, most of their collaboration occurred virtually – before this became a mainstream idea – with only a handful of face-to-face meetings. Second, Barker and Kennedy exemplified operating at the verge, as they were a diverse combination across all dimensions of diversity. Finally, one of the keys to success for Barker and Kennedy’s collaboration was keeping things simple and uncomplicated.

However, Kennedy and Barker also arrived at crossroads which put their convictions to test and ultimately taught them two valuable lessons. First, they learned that mutualism is not simply a one-time decision made upon initiating a collaborative relationship. Rather, there may be times when reminders about mutualism and the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership need to influence decision-making along collaborative process. Second, they learned that mutualism does not necessarily mean that all par-

ties must merge and operate as one unit in order to produce innovations. Instead, Barker and Kennedy learned that, “...working at the verge of differences often calls for a more flexible and fluid arrangement among partners, so innovations don’t get unintentionally bogged down by the weight of the collaboration itself or in complexities and struggles that are usurping time, energy, and the flow of progress.”

One mechanism for facilitation meeting at the verge of differences is the virtual gathering place. Serving as a catalyst for previously unimaginable collaborations, websites such as Skype, YouTube, and Facebook have open up new avenues for productive communication. Long before these enterprises were developed, Kennedy was fascinated by the idea of virtual gatherings and online classrooms. As these technologies began gaining more widespread acceptance, she tested the water in January 2003 by lurking on a Weight Watchers

When it comes to great collaboration, think about the depth of coverage that comes in pairing men and women, an academic with a practitioner, or a left-brain thinking with a right-brain thinker.

Online message board. In February 2004, she established her own message board on the same website, inviting “buddies” to share in each other’s weight loss journey. Since then, this message board has expanded to include a diverse group of virtual friends who connect and support each other with an inclusive sense of shared ownership. Given the good that has been produced by this small example, it is easy to imagine the good that could result if organizations created larger scale examples of such inclusion.

Based on this small, but uplifting, initial experience with virtual collaboration, Kennedy ventured into the virtual world even further. In November 2004, her company decided to launch the Global Dialogue Center, a virtual gathering place open to the public worldwide. The goal of the center is to think, question, and explore ideas collaboratively in order to become more effective leaders and put differences to work to improve the world. The Global Dialogue Center was purposefully planned around the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership and has facilitated

mutualistic relationships that transcend the barriers of distance and difference.

The virtual world provides endless opportunities for connecting, collaborating, learning, innovating, and putting differences to work to enhance our world. As Kennedy concludes, however, "The future of the Internet is largely up to us, collectively. As with any tool or other gift. We can make a conscious choice about how we use it for right or wrong. If enough of us were living by the Five Distinctive Qualities of Leadership, holding personal responsibility as a core belief and mutualism as the final arbiter, we just might create the tipping point that will ensure the Internet will be good for all." History demonstrates that the most successful leaders have found new ways for connecting people and inspiring greatness, and the time is right to follow in this path!



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time: 8-10 Hours, 208 Pages in Book

As our society becomes increasingly diverse, it is important for leaders to recognize and capitalize upon the benefits of putting differences to work. According to Kennedy, "...putting differences to work is the most powerful accelerator for generating new ideas, creating innovative solutions, executing organizational strategies, and engaging everyone in the process." Given these benefits, it appears paramount that leaders begin the process of creating more inclusive environments where differences are used to facilitate success. In **Putting Our Differences to Work**, author Debbe Kennedy seeks to provide readers with tools for internalizing these ideas and putting them into practice to benefit individuals, organizations, and society.

One unique feature about **Putting Our Differences to Work** – compared with other diversity books – is the broad definition of diversity. Rather than assuming the narrow stance that diversity equates only to such characteristics as gender and ethnicity, Kennedy views diversity as occurring on a spectrum that also includes such differences as work habits, thinking styles, experiences, management styles, and generational insight.

The book is organized into three main parts. The chap-

ters are easy to read, well-organized, and filled with real-world examples. In fact, the book contains over 25 stories demonstrating best-practices in putting differences to work. Each chapter also includes highlighted boxes of bulleted "key points" after major sections to recap the main ideas in a consumer-friendly format. Finally, chapters contain figures, lists, and pull quotes to complement the written content.

At the end of the book, readers will find a section titled "Resources and Studies." This represents a highly useful and practical description of various websites, videos, tools, and studies. For example, Kennedy provides links to the Putting Our Differences to Work Resource Center and the Global Dialogue Center. In addition, a description of Joel Barker's videos is provided.

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