

The Diversity Icebreaker applied in conflict management: from Norway, through the Balkans and to the Middle East.

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Presented at SIETAR Europe conference in Tallinn, 19th-21st of September 2013.

Introduction

The Diversity Icebreaker

The Diversity Icebreaker (DI) is a training and development concept launched by Human Factors AS in 1995 and which continues to be developed today (Ekelund, 1997; Ekelund & Langvik, 2008). Today, the core of the concept – the questionnaire – has been translated into 19 languages for commercial purposes. In the SIETAR context, DI has been presented in London, York, Kraków, Mumbai, Berlin, Barcelona and Frankfurt. It is typically used in six different areas: team and project work, cross-cultural trainings and diversity management, communication and conflict management trainings, kick-offs, self-understanding and leadership development.

DI consists of a questionnaire that measures preferences for communication, interaction and problem solving styles; and a seminar formula built upon it. Various validation studies have been conducted relating the three dimensions to concepts such as the Big Five personality factors, Emotional Intelligence, Cultural Values, and Team Performance (Ekelund & Langvik, 2008).

The seminar formula consists of four (or five) subsequent stages. In the first one, the participants fill out the questionnaire and score the results by themselves. They obtain results on three

dimensions: Red, Blue, and Green. The meaning of these colours, representing dimensions of preferences measured in the questionnaire, is not explained to the participants at that moment. In the second stage, the participants are assigned to three groups according to what their most dominant colour is; and asked to work together to answer two questions:

“What are the good qualities of your own colour in interaction with others?”

and:

“What are the qualities of the two other colour groups in interactions with others?”

In the third stage, the groups are asked to present the results. The way how the participants in one group perceive their own colour is contrasted with how the other two groups perceive it, and attention is given to the processes of social construction taking place when the meaning of Red, Blue and Green is being shared and sometimes negotiated.

The fourth stage is a learning process initiated by asking the participants a question:

”What have you learned from the time you started filling out the questionnaire until now?”

Some of the typical answers to this question are: “it is nice to be working among equals”, “there are some significant consequences of labelling each other”, “we need all colours when we work together”, “one has all the colours inside”, or “it is OK to be Red if the others acknowledge this as a positive quality in our interaction.” All these comments are then acknowledged by the facilitator and the discussion is based on selected, relevant theories, as well as on the goals and objectives of the particular training session.

The fifth, optional stage is concerned with developing specific practices for the future and emerges as a salient follow-up of the understanding of the social construction of the categories. It can be used to develop a collective group into a self-managed group, e.g. in regard to task distribution, where a Red person asks a Blue one to take over an analysis that requires attention to details and figures.

DI used in cross-cultural training and development

From surface-level to deep-level diversity

The field of diversity management has been dominated by a paradigm in which the most important sources of diversity are considered to be the demographic characteristics, with race and gender of the primary concern (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt, 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). However, this approach focuses on the surface diversity. The Diversity Icebreaker primarily addresses the diversity seen from the perspective of the deep-level values and personal attributes. This results in perceiving the people as being different also in terms of the differences between their preferences for interaction, communication and problem solving styles.

This deep diversity is considered to be a part of culture – as we understand it.

Often the iceberg metaphor is used to explain the different levels of culture. What is most visible – the tip of the iceberg – are the behaviours, norms and artefacts, which are concrete and tangible. Below the surface however are the personal norms and attitudes, values and basic assumptions influenced by culture at the macro-level, organizations at the meso-level and by the personality, values and cognitive preferences at micro-level (Schein, 1983, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The creation of shared understanding of individual differences through Red, Blue and Green

is a social construction process unfolding at the meso-level and building upon elements from the micro-level.

For the participants training in cross-cultural interaction, it has been recommended that the Diversity Icebreaker is used as a positive experience with a co-creation of a shared language, before they approach and discuss the more complex and difficult cultural differences (Ekelund & Maznevski, 2007). Kazuma Matoba (2011) claims that it is important to first arrive at a shared agreement about how we, as a group, understand the cognitive differences – or our cognitive diversity, i.e. the different ways one can handle information; before immersing into the complex and sticky world of differences related to the cultural or professional identity. The DI seminar applied in this context seems to contribute to building participant's shared understanding integrated in the language of Red, Blue and Green – a mean to describe a specific type of the cognitive diversity. Thus, under the seminar, the model and the language of Red, Blue and Green become the pivotal points for the deep diversity and an intuitive way used to map differences in attitudes, norms and behaviours. For example, one sees that Red can manifest itself in different symbolic behaviours and customs across cultures, but bears the same Red, social oriented component across different cultures.

Red, Blue and Green exist across cultures and it may thus happen that people from two different cultures are more similar to each other in terms of their Red, Blue and Green profiles, than some other people from the same culture. On the other hand, it may as well be that two individuals differ significantly both in terms of the DI results and due to the cultural gap between them. Nonetheless, despite that the partners of a cross-cultural interaction have different dominant colours, they can still draw on their less dominant preferences to connect and build bridges (in line with the “one has all the colours” notion arrived at during the seminar (Ekelund & Pluta, 2013, *ibid.*).

The Diversity Icebreaker in conflict management training

Training personal competence

The *Personal Workbook* (Ekelund & Rydningen, 2008) presents guidelines for how to interact with persons with either of the dominant preferences in order to achieve good rapport in the communication process. These recommendations are focused on how individuals can develop flexibility in the way they approach the others. It has been suggested that these guidelines could become a part of a potential repertoire of means for development, should misunderstandings and conflicts occur, i.e. a secondary prophylaxis strategy. Thus, if it turns out that your approach does not work, and it seems that the one you interact with has a Blue preference, consider the following:

- be down to earth and practical, focus on practicality;
- be logical and goal oriented;
- use facts and examples;
- focus on details;
- use numbers and calculations;
- be structured and well prepared.

Similar recommendations have been presented for Red and Green (Ekelund, 1997). Strategies like these have been used in trainings related to communication and conflict management.

The Diversity Icebreaker in reconciliation processes

We – the consultants from Human Factors AS – had some surprising experiences in our work with the Diversity Icebreak-

er. An example was when we were asked to kick-off a meeting with both management and trade union representatives. With no specific knowledge about the event, we chose to conduct a classic DI seminar.

In the discussion at the end of the seminar, one of the representatives expressed the effects of the seminar by saying “we are gathered here and we have seen the value of diverse perspectives; and we have experienced a positive atmosphere of being open towards the other, I would like to share some of the perceptions we had on our conflicting areas.” The other part reciprocated with the same kind of openness and an attitude of “more-than-normal openness”. “More-than-normal openness” became thereby a phrase we have started to use to illustrate the “breaking through effect” of trust building processes which the DI seminars set off. It seemed to be the elements linked to the atmosphere, expectations, respect, etc. that made the participants voice their concerns more openly than previously. Due to these experiences we started to formulate ideas on using the seminar as a tool to create a positive-reconciliation climate.

From local practice to global outreach

Networking and surprising learning in the Balkans

In 2009 we were invited to present the Diversity Icebreaker at the South East European Regional Conference of Psychology in Sofia, Bulgaria. Our presentation focused on a theoretical analysis of the DI seminar, showing how the seminar moved across distinct stages, with a shift of different scientific paradigms accompanying it (Ekelund, Davcheva & Iversen, 2009). Ivana Petrović at the University of Belgrade, Serbia, and her students brought the concept home and started to explore its appliances.

In 2010 they arranged a symposium on the Diversity Icebreaker at the 58th congress of the Serbian Psychology Association in Sabor, Serbia. There, two of Ivana Petrović’s colleagues,

Danijela Petrović and Vitomir Jovanović, presented an independent study comparing DI to Thomas-Kilmann Scale (Petrović & Jovanović, 2010), which is used for examining preferences related to handling conflicts – I had not known about their work until the very conference. This experience illustrates how cross-cultural, joint projects can have spin-off effects, especially when people engaged in the local networks take part in them. (I will later illustrate similar experiences in the Middle East and then, at the end, link this to the combination of cross-cultural learning and open innovation.)

This study enhanced our understanding of the Diversity Icebreaker with yet another element relevant in the conflict management context. We decided to seek for conflict resolution organisations in the Balkan countries, which we could partner with in order to take these results to practice, but did not succeed.

The Middle East Experiences

Opportunity knocks...

Following the abovementioned experiences we set to seek for opportunities to explore the use of DI in the Middle East – an area known for long lasting, geopolitical and cultural conflicts. The question was whether the DI seminar would yield similar results in the Middle East as it did elsewhere; and if so, the ambition was to apply the concept in practice in cooperation with established conflict management institutions in Israel and Palestine. We assumed that such organizations would have an established methodology for conflict resolution processes, which we could learn from. Furthermore, we were inspired by Dewey's ideas of construction and reconstruction; and by Fesmire's ethical statements about the moral duty to try out the limits of the knowledge and practice in order to create a better practical world (Fesmire, 2003). The question was if this could be reconstructed inside a more complex, war-related geo-political situation, like the one in the Middle East. And, what new kind of learning could emerge from the research and practice in such areas.

Cooperation with the Hebrew University, Jerusalem

A project was launched in cooperation with Lilach Sagiv from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in February 2011. The purpose was to replicate the experiences and document the effects of the Diversity Icebreaker seminar, we had observed in Norway. As a part of this project, 26 DI seminars were conducted at the Hebrew University for a total of approx. 650 participants, in the years 2011–12. The participants were students, whereof about 10% were of Arabic background, 20% were immigrant Jews, and 70% were Jews born and raised in Israel. In addition, a systematic validation and evaluation of the DI in relation to other psychological concepts was conducted.

Results

I will not describe the results in a precise, rigorous way in the present paper; another paper by Lilach Sagiv and her research team will be published discussing them. However, in order to recount what we have learnt and to indicate the concept's potential, I will share some of the first, interesting insights from the project. So far (as of September 2013), two-thirds of the collected material have been analysed and some statistically significant results have been observed pointing to that the DI seminar:

- reduces distrust;
- creates positive affect;
- and reduces negative emotions.

The results also indicate that:

- The DI categories of Red, Blue and Green yielded a similar relation pattern to the personality traits in Israel, as they had in previous studies in Norway, indicating cross-cultural valid generalization of the concept (Ekelund & Langvik, 2008).

- The properties of Red, Blue and Green seem to correspond in a meaningful way to how the personal values (in Schwartz values model).

This allowed us to assume that both values and personality significantly influence a person's preferences for Red, Blue or Green and that the effect of the seminar is similar to what we had been observing in Norway and elsewhere.

Theory and model development

As aforementioned, the project's objective was to document whether the Diversity Icebreaker would have similar effects in the Middle East as it was observed in the other parts of the world. In the process of designing the study together with the researchers from the Hebrew University, a shared understanding emerged that DI, in this context, could be best described as a process that builds trust and uses it to enter into good dialogs about conflict issues.

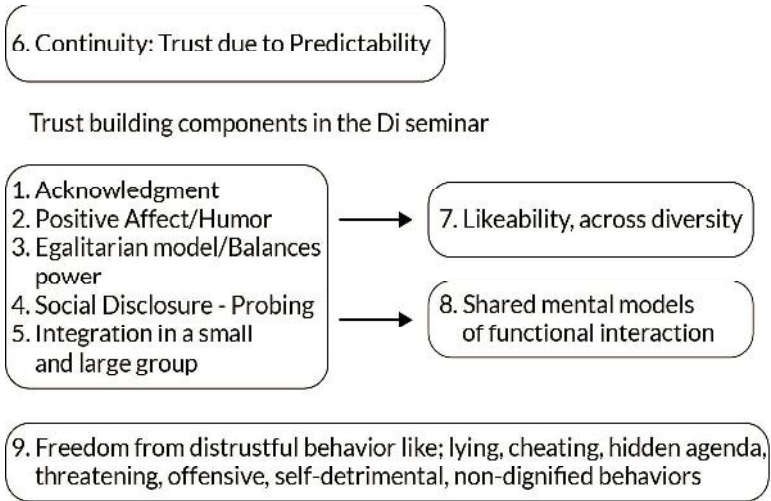
A theoretical model resulted from discourses afterwards, illustrating how trust is developed in the DI seminar. The model is one of the surprising, additional outcomes of the project and it will be presented in detail in this paper. The model will be used as a starting point for the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of DI's potential role in the abovementioned conflict resolution processes (Ekelund & Sagiv, 2012). The knowledge we gained in this project and the model was brought back to Norway the very same year in an evaluation of a conflict resolution process conducted in a hospital setting.

The trust model

The first five elements discussed below (1-5) are present in the early stages of the seminar; the sixth element (Continuity) stands for an expectation of the stability of the seminar's effects. The last three components (7-9) stand for the results emerging from the elevated trust.

Figure 1

Trust model for DI workshops



Description of the model's components:

1. *Acknowledgement.* The idea of the importance of acknowledgement is derived from Roger's therapeutic models of acknowledgement for change, from the motivational theories of Self-enhancement and the need for social approval.
2. *Positive affect/humour.* Shared humour in the DI creates a shared understanding among participants and facilitates interaction, dialogue and change. The positive affect itself can be seen a reinforcer in such a way that it strengthens the positive behaviours in the seminar it is a result of.

Egalitarian model / Balanced Power. No power differences are integral to Red, Blue and Green and during the social processes in the seminar people with different colour preferences quickly

realize that they are dependent on each other. In the seminars, Red, Blue, and Green introduce a trilemma structure and we make sure that the time, attention and positive self-understanding are equally distributed between the groups.

3. *Self-Disclosure and Social Probing.* Revealing one's opinions and intentions is considered to be an important stage or element of a trust building process and in the DI seminars we encourage participants to say more than usual in terms of self-bragging, as well as when the negative stereotypes about the other colours are disclosed in a funny, non-threatening way. In the DI seminars, the fear of rejection implied in such "more-than-normal" openness is reduced by humour (which enables to talk in a less-threatening way about difficult topics) and dissolved in group interactions. Eventually, instead of being condemned for the content, the participants are praised for their level of openness.
4. *Integration in the small and large groups.* A small group of mono-coloured people instantly creates an in-group cohesion built upon shared complementary perspectives and ideas. We "diversify and unify" at the same time. In the group-presentations stage, all participants seem to understand that they need each other to be able to ensure a high quality problem solving or to become a high performance team. The cognitive diversity introduced at the individual-members level by the Red, Blue, and Green model integrates at the whole-group level, by creating an understanding of how these individual qualities should be applied in the interaction and task distribution at the group level. Again, also here humour plays an important role as a facilitating factor and an indicator of group cohesiveness.
5. *Continuity: trust due to predictability.* The positive affect reinforces behaviour manifested in the seminar and creates motivation to sustain it. The positive elements of belonging to a group, being acknowledged, and being a part of an egalitarian model are also the components that motivate for continuation. This creates a shared desire for continuity and pre-

dictability, which is yet another component of trust, a trust in that the future interaction and task-related processes will be as positive as they were in the seminar.

6. *Likeability across diversity.* People are attracted to those similar to themselves. Although the majority of people have one dominant preference, they also obtain scores on the other two preferences. Thus, everybody shares qualities of Red, Blue and Green to greater or lesser extent.
7. *Shared mental models of functional interaction.* A shared model of interaction emerges as a consequence of the seminar: “If I have an idea, I will voice it, and you will integrate this idea in a positive way, and together we will search for a way to integrate these ideas and make them function to the best collective result”.
8. *Freedom from the distrustful behaviour.* The DI seminar creates a shared understanding of which are the good, beautiful and functional behaviours. A distrustful act is a negation of these behaviours and, since norms are implicitly or explicitly created by the positive and acknowledging behaviours during the seminar, the distrustful behaviours will naturally fall in to the non-acceptable acts category.

Cost effective trust building

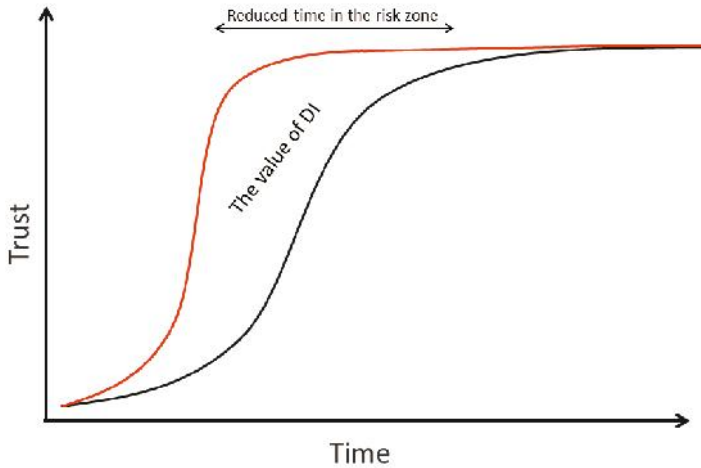
We believe that the nine components described above provide good reasons to use the DI seminars as a trust-booster in the cross-cultural and post-war conflict situations in the Middle East.

It usually takes about 1-2 hours to run a DI seminar, which makes it a very time-effective intervention. The first hours, days, weeks and years in the conflict resolution processes are influenced by distrust. The most relevant question for the conflict resolution processes is thus how fast it is possible to change a distrustful climate into a one characterized by trustful interactions. Since the distrustful period is a challenging situation where the process often gets stuck, the faster trust building occurs, the lower

the risk that the process fails. Furthermore, an effective problem solving of a transformative character can probably be executed most effectively when trust is established. We believe that the DI seminar's fast and high quality trust building effect makes the seminar a very cost-effective intervention. The graph on the next page is a visual demonstration of our assumptions regarding trust development in DI (the distances in the graph are not to be taken literally):

Figure 2

The value of the Diversity Icebreaker



Surprises when crossing borders

As we have experienced it in the Balkans before, one of the learning points taken from this cross-cultural research interaction, was our surprise concerning perspectives, initiatives and practices we got involved in and have not planned for. Outside the main scope of the research on trust, there were some examples of surprising stories, which unfolded as a part of our work with the

Hebrew University and which we have not expected or had ambitions for.

Another surprise was a comparative study investigating the effect the facilitator's conducting the DI workshop background (independent variable). Four of the seminars were led by an experienced, English speaking DI facilitator (the author). Two other seminars were led by a facilitator from Israel inexperienced in DI. Two more seminars were led by another DI inexperienced academic with an Israeli background (totalling to 10 seminars in this study with N=201 participants). The Israeli facilitators had not conducted the DI seminar before; they conducted the training in Hebrew, following guidelines in the User Manual and training DVD.

There were no significant differences in the positive results between the experienced, English speaking facilitator and the first time Hebrew speaking trainers. This indicates that the concept is easily replicated across cultures and with local facilitators. Another explanation is that the use of English as a second language reduced the positive, trust-building effect of the seminar. This strengthens the possibilities for dissemination of practice across cultures.

Another example of a surprise was an experiment investigating the DI's effects on creativity and identity. In it, the seminar groups were tested before and after the seminar in relation to these two constructs (N=81, students). Results indicate that the participants become more creative and more aware of the relational Self after the seminar (Rubel, 2014). This indicates an effect that is relevant for social creativity, i.e. creative problem solving on group level (an important part of conflict transformation processes).

Platform for future work

The research at the Hebrew University will continue. An academic cooperation has been established in the West Bank

as well, however – due to an academic boycott – it will not be directly connected to the current research project. So far, we have run a DI seminar with 100 Palestinian students in Ramallah, Palestine. A major hospital in Jerusalem, with a 100 years history of exemplary practice, independent of ethnic or religious influences, is also planning on using DI. Furthermore, there are plans to train conflict management facilitators in two peace oriented institutions in the Middle East, each of them on either of the sides of the wall dividing Israel and Palestine.

From local practice to global outreach: a meta-perspective

There are some historical narratives that have made possible DI's growth from being a local concept to one with a more global outreach, which the path into the Middle East. I will describe these components and share elements of the business strategy of our organisation, in line with these historical paths of development.

First, a business model for a knowledge-oriented company

At the end of the 80-ies I took part in academic discussions upon the creation of knowledge that was possible to achieve for a consultation company through the means of maintaining a close contact with the academic field (Røvik, 1991). I was inspired by the ideas of creating a unique competitive advantage, not easy to copy (Porter, 1985) and ideas about the 'knowledge firms' (Risling & Sveiby, 1986). Compared to purely academic institutions, our small consultation company embedded a large variety of experiences from different public and private institutions. Based upon Lyotard's post-modern knowledge ideas about information nodes or nexuses, combining this breadth and volume of information with an inductive learning processes (1984); I thought we could create a type of knowledge that would be different from the traditional academic institutional practice. If we could build such

knowledge, and services based upon our own experiences, it would not be easy for others to copy them.

An example of this was our first conflict management training manual, where guidelines were developed based upon twenty extremely difficult conflict situations (Ekelund, 1992). No other company we know of in our region had gathered similar volume of challenging conflict cases. In a similar way, it would be impossible to organize the scientific work done at the Hebrew University just within our small consultation company in Norway.

Second, an understanding of cross-cultural research

Berry's model of cross-cultural research emphasized the need of having researchers from different cultures involved in a study working together: both concerning formulation of hypotheses and gathering and analysis of data (Berry et al, 2002). In 1997, I initiated a cross-cultural research on "the development of trust among employees to leaders" in different cultures (Hua et al, 2003). Applying Berry's model revealed the huge potential of learning not only on the issues of the study, but also on the cultural assumptions only possible to be revealed through the perspectives of researchers from a different culture. The need of trust in between researchers in order to develop such type of learning was a joint experience. Trust was developed by getting to know each other, having multiple meetings together, reading each other's drafts and analysing the data together. In our descriptions of the process, we realized the potential of creating new knowledge through intuition, descriptions, revealing implicit assumptions and tacit knowledge – and all this before formulating new ideas about the object of the study (Crossan et al, 1997). The trust model emerged out of two years of such cooperative work with the partners from Israel.

Third, a systematic use of networking for creating new knowledge

In 2001, I initiated and executed a master program in knowledge management for post-graduate, experienced psychologists in Scandinavia – a program delivered by different business schools (Karlson & Ekelund, 2004). In this program we focused on how network partners in value creation could add resources and perspectives that would promote both learning and execution.

The consequence of this type of learning implied that we, in our consultation company, searched globally for alliances with academics and institutions that were willing to contribute to research and development of the Diversity Icebreaker. A business model of value creation in networks by Stabell & Fjeldstad (1998) was our inspiration in that process. Later we learned that Chesbrough (2003) would have probably called this business model an “open innovation model”.

More than 50 academics from 20 different countries have been involved in the research and development of DI due to this strategy since 2005. The entrances both in the Balkan countries as well as in the Middle East resulted from attending professional conferences like SIETAR and other academic networks.

Fourth, a moral obligation to contribute to a better world

In 2010, I took part in an interdisciplinary project on international tourism. When writing the research report, I was familiarized by one of the co-authors with Dewey’s construction and reconstruction perspective – testing the limits of knowledge applicability (Samuelsen et al, 2010). Another work I also was introduced to was that of Fesmire (2003). This encounter added to Dewey’s work a moral obligation for those who had the knowledge to contribute to making a better world. I then decided to test the limits of the trust-building capability in conflict resolution processes of the Diversity Icebreaker as a concept in the most

challenging parts of the world. In the Balkans, I was able to do some research. In the South Africa and in Ireland my contacts and efforts were fruitless. But, in the Middle East I received a positive answer from one of my global network contacts, Lilach Sagiv at Hebrew University, when I asked her whether she was interested in testing the limits of my knowledge, created locally in Norway, in the Middle East context.

Summary

There are stories in Human Factors encompassing more than 20 years of business and research, where trust, cross-cultural differences and conflict management have been central. Added to these, there has always been present a business strategy of applying this knowledge into practice, in order to bring the local, Norwegian experience in using DI into a global market ; as well as a strategi of challenging the processes of developing local knowledge, together with a local partners, e.g. in the Middle East. As in the Balkans, also here we were surprised by the local initiatives taken by persons in our network and their partners. Sharing experiences over time and developing knowledge together have been ways of creating and revealing new type of knowledge, relevant both for the academy as well as the business.

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