

Praveen Gupta offers his personal review of the book by Dr R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr– “Building a House for Diversity: How a fable about a Giraffe and an Elephant offers new strategies for today’s workforce

Building a House for Diversity: How a fable about a Giraffe and an Elephant offers new strategies for today’s workforce

A giraffe and an elephant consider themselves friends. But when the giraffe invites the elephant into his home, disaster strikes. The house has been designed to meet the needs of the tall, slender giraffe. The elephant smashes into doorways and walls trying to maneuver through the narrow confines. The giraffe gently suggests aerobics and ballet classes. The elephant is unconvinced. To him the house is the problem!

Recognised as one of the world’s leading experts on diversity management, author Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr. with co-author Marjorie Woodruff bring the subject up close and personal by letting people tell their own stories about diversity in corporate settings. As it unfolds, the reader gets to hear:

- Perspectives from the ‘head giraffes’ who make the rules, insiders (usually white males), and outsiders (usually minorities and women)
- Voices that speak from a range of attitudes: the assimilated, the pioneers, the angry, and the uncompromising
- Insightful analysis by the author on what these stories tell us about the challenges and opportunities of diversity
- Legendary coach Phil Jackson, of the Chicago Bulls, on how he dealt with diversity tensions on a team that included Michael Jordan, Dennis Rodman, and Scottie Pippen

If giraffes are the people who own the house, head giraffes are the people who are ultimately in charge. It is they who decide where the organization will go and how it will get there. They also determine the culture that exists inside the house.

Elephants are outsiders trying to fit into houses that are built for others. The elephant experience is universal. All of us, say the authors, including white males – feel like an elephant in a giraffe house - at certain times and in certain settings.

As a rich tapestry of anecdotes about giraffes and elephants unfolds, it only becomes too obvious that diversity is not a function of race or gender but a complex and ever-changing blend of attributes, behaviours and talents.

The readers are reminded that different components of a diversity mixture have different perspectives. The authors agree that in organizational settings where diversity is an issue, the ideas are not standalone as presented in the book but as complex and interlinked as pieces in a kaleidoscope.

Pragmatic as the readers would realize the authors are, they accept that many remain reluctant to fully embrace genuine diversity. They in turn expect us to understand that

diversity tension is inevitable and complexity does accompany diversity. Moreover, dealing with something as complicated as diversity cannot be left to managers and owners. True diversity management begins and ends with individuals.

The book starts and concludes with Personal Diversity Maturity Index (PDMI) and assesses your current 'diversity maturity' level. At the heart of it sits identification of Core Diversity Skills and a process framework, which entails:

- Ability to identify diversity mixtures and their related tensions
- Ability to analyse the mixtures and related tensions
- Ability to select an appropriate response

The book successfully demystifies diversity management without being too simplistic. Successful respondents demonstrate a kind of diversity maturity that allows them to internalize key diversity concepts and use them to inform their actions. They are adept at applying the core diversity skills as well. Both diversity maturity and demonstration of the core skills call for education, training and practice. No shortcuts.

This is not just a diagnostic but a preventive and curative set of prescriptions that will keep any organization in fine fettle. Rather than just limit itself to 'what' and 'why', the book ably handles 'how' of diversity management. Anyone wishing to insure against repeating the mistakes of others is offered a way forward with the giraffe and elephant.

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