# The
# MULTICULTURAL
# MIND

## Unleashing the Hidden Force for
## Innovation in Your Organization

## DAVID C. THOMAS

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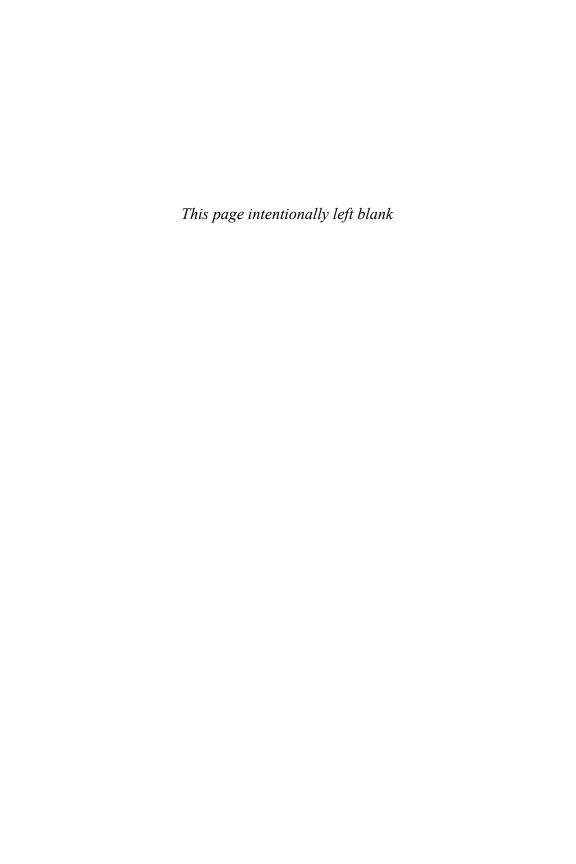Unleashing the Hidden Force for

Innovation in Your Organization

# DAVID C. THOMAS

# The Multicultural Mind

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# PREFACE

Recent research has confirmed something that we have sus-
pected for a long time—multicultural experience leads to greater
creativity. People who have multiple cultural identities (multi-
culturals) are at the top of the list of people with significant
multicultural experience. In this book I marry this new research
with well-known findings from psychology and management to
create a road map for understanding this growing segment of the
workforce, the multicultural mind, and how organizations can
leverage and model people with these unique skills to produce
innovative organizations. The principles of innovation are not
a secret, but the secret weapon in achieving innovation in your
organization may be the multicultural mind.

While grounded in sound scientific research, this book is not
an academic text. It is a guide for understanding the potential of
a newly emerging and significant portion of the workforce that
may hold the key to innovation for many companies. Unlike
many management books, this book does not offer simple "back
of the envelope" solutions to complex problems. Rather, I try

to synthesize the existing knowledge about multiculturals and innovation in a way that managers will find useful. By understanding multicultural individuals and modeling their development, organizations can chart a course for innovation that takes advantage of a resource that has been hidden in plain sight, the multicultural mind.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 introduces multicultural individuals and describes how the same forces of globalization that have created the complex and dynamic environment in which organizations must compete have also provided a resource to help them compete: multicultural individuals. Part 1 also describes the sources of cultural identity; how growing up in a particular society shapes the way we think and behave, and how multiculturals internalize two or more sets of values, attitudes, and beliefs about appropriate behavior. Finally, part 1 describes the process of confronting cultural differences that results in a multicultural mind. This can occur in many ways, from moving to a new country to dealing with culturally different coworkers.

Part 2 is devoted to developing the kind of understanding of multiculturals that is required to engage with them effectively in organizations. I discuss the many ways in which multicultural individuals experience and manage their multiple cultural identities, and the implications that this has for them, their social relationships and for how their unique skills (broader worldview, heightened sensitivity and perceptual acuity, greater empathy, and greater cognitive complexity) can best be utilized. I also discuss the relationship of multilingualism to multiculturalism and the role that language plays in managing a culturally diverse workforce. Finally, I show how visible differences in individuals influence the way in which multiculturals see themselves and the

world, as well as how they can help with strategies for managing dissimilar groups in organizations. The categorization of people according to surface characteristics can mask the value that they bring to organizations.

In part 3 I focus on what organizations can do to leverage the unique skills of multiculturals in the service of innovation. I discuss how important the work situation is in influencing multiculturals and on the process of innovation, and what organizations can do to create the type of climate (flexible situations, strong communication, and sufficient resources) that is needed. Understanding how the work situation fosters or supresses innovation is a key factor in leveraging the skills of multiculturals. I also outline the roles (bridging, integrating, mediating) that multiculturals can play to get the most out of multicultural teams, which we have long known are a source of creative ideas. Finally, I offer some ideas on developing organizations that allow multiculturals to assume roles in which they can best contribute to innovation. I also show how modeling the experience of multiculturals can lead to everyone developing a multicultural mind.

This book asks us to think differently about managing diversity in organizations. The multicultural mind is the product of the diversity that exists within individuals, as opposed to between individuals. Understanding the value of a multicultural mind is a significant step in creating organizations that work for and bring out the best in everyone.

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**Part I**

# INTRODUCING MULTICULTURALS

## The Multicultural Mind and Innovation

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# A RESOURCE HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

## Multiculturals and Innovation

There was a time when all an organization needed to succeed was to improve. But in today's dynamic and complex competitive environment organizations need to innovate, and most of them know it. What many don't know is that there is a largely untapped source of innovation that is hiding in plain sight. These are individuals with multiple cultural identities,[1] such as:

> Carlos Ghosn, born in Brazil to Lebanese parents, educated in France, and is now a superstar CEO in—Japan? He is so famous for turning around the fortunes of Nissan that his life story has been made into a Japanese comic book series. He is the CEO of Renault-Nissan Alliance.

> Ralph Baer (born Rudolph Heinrich Baer in Germany) immigrated to the United States with his family as a result of World War II. He took up electronics and trained as a radio service engineer. In the 1960s he came up with the idea of playing games on television screens and went on to develop the Magnavox Odyssey and other consoles and game units. Known

as the "Father of Video Games," he was awarded the National Medal of Technology in 2004.

Arianna Huffington was born in Greece, moved to the United Kingdom at age 16, and was educated at Cambridge University. Her early life after university involved traveling to music festivals for the British Broadcasting Corporation and spending summers in France. After moving to the United States, she developed a career as an author and syndicated columnist. One of the most influential women in media, she is president and editor in chief of The Huffington Post Media Group.

Muhtar Kent was born in New York City in 1952. His father, Necdet Kent was the Turkish consul general. He attended high school in Turkey and then earned undergraduate and MBA degrees in the United Kingdom. He is chairman and CEO of the Coca-Cola Company.

What these highly successful individuals all have in common of course is their multicultural backgrounds. However, what may be more important to their success is that their multicultural experience has allowed them to perceive and process information differently. They have *multicultural minds!*

The flattening of the world through globalization has given more and more people the opportunity to have multicultural experiences. For example, more than 13 percent of Americans were born outside the United States, and in Canada and Australia immigrants make up more than 20 percent of the population.[2] Migrating to a new country, having parents from different cultures, or spending a significant amount of time in a foreign country has become commonplace. However, these multicultural experiences do not always lead to having a multicultural

mind. These individuals may not have developed multicultural identities, or they may have difficulty in managing their identities. Or they may never have been in situations that allowed their multicultural identities to come to the surface. Ghosn, Baer, Huffington, and Kent have been fortunate in that their multiculturalism allowed them to develop multicultural minds, and their environment allowed them to leverage their unique skills and abilities. Not everyone is this fortunate. This book is about understanding how multicultural experience leads to a multicultural mind, how organizations can leverage this ability in their employees for competitive advantage, and how each of us can develop a multicultural mind.

## The Multicultural Mind and Organizations

To understand, engage, and learn to harness the skills of individuals with multiple cultural identities, we must challenge several assumptions about managing cultural diversity in today's organizations.

First, as a result of globalization, it is now commonplace that employees and managers in organizations are multicultural. They have internalized the values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about behavior of more than one culture. Therefore, focusing on managing the differences *among* individuals with unique cultural profiles must be tempered with an understanding of how to help individuals manage the cultural differences that exist *within* themselves.

Second, when we understand that individuals can internalize more than one cultural profile, we challenge the assumption that any sort of visible surface indicator can provide effective insight

into an individual's cultural makeup. Organizations must get to know their employees at a deeper level.

Finally, much of what has been published about managing diversity has focused on gaining knowledge about culturally different others and building on that knowledge to bridge cultural differences. This book is not about bridging differences. It is about using difference to advantage. It is about leveraging the skills that individuals with multiple cultural identities bring to the organization and also using their special skills and abilities to grow the organization.

Today's organizations need to *innovate* not only to succeed but (for many) just to survive. Some management scholars such as Gary Hamel argue that it is a nonlinear, nonobvious, nonincremental type of innovation that will produce long-term competitive advantage.[3] However, there are many types of innovation, all of which might be important to organizations. The first, which Hamel is talking about, is a radical change to products and services that can dramatically alter what companies do. Examples include the automobile, penicillin, the laptop computer, the iPad, and online shopping. A second type is a radical change to processes. These changes in fundamental ways to manage, design, produce, or distribute are rare. Some examples are the automobile production line and the Six Sigma approach to error reduction.[4] A third type involves incremental improvement in products, services, or processes. Most innovations are of this type and lead to developments such as cost reduction, product enhancements, improvements in environmental or safety performance. Examples include the second-generation iPad, same-day dry cleaning, and reductions in the amount of water used in the production of food. The Conference Board defines innovation as "the process through which economic and social

value is extracted from knowledge through the generation, development, and implementation of ideas to produce new or improved strategies, capabilities, products, services, or processes."[5] At the center of this definition of innovation is the word *ideas*. The generation, development, and implementation of new and improved ideas occurs when individuals have expertise, are motivated, and most important think differently.[6] Of course new ideas are founded on factual knowledge and technical expertise. We wouldn't expect innovation in gene splicing or computer software to come from someone without significant expertise in those areas. Likewise, just because people are capable of generating creative ideas does not mean they will do so. They must have the desire, the motivation to put forth the effort. We have long known that intrinsic motivation (deep interest, involvement, curiosity, and enjoyment of the work itself) is the most powerful driver of creativity.[7]

In the following story, Ruth not only has the knowledge and motivation to be creative, but she has the ability to see things that others have missed and to *think differently*.

> Ruth Marianna Moskowicz was born in Denver, Colorado, to Polish-Jewish immigrants. She married Elliot Handler, a businessman and inventor who cofounded Mattel Toys in 1945. While Elliot invented toys for the fledgling company, Ruth Handler stayed at home raising their two children, Barbara and Kenneth. When Barbara was a preteen in the early 1950s, Ruth noticed her playing with paper dolls as if they were adults. At the time the only three-dimensional dolls on the market were made to look like babies, not adult women. Ruth mentioned her idea of a three-dimensional doll shaped like an adult woman (with a wardrobe made out of fabric) to her husband and to Harold

Matson, the other cofounder of Mattel. Both men rejected the idea, believing that parents would not buy their children a doll with a voluptuous figure. But on a trip to Switzerland, Ruth discovered a German doll with an adult figure and fashion wardrobe called a "Bild Lilli Doll," which was designed after a cartoon character and originally marketed to adults in bars and tobacco shops as a gag gift. She redesigned the doll and named it after her daughter. "Barbie" debuted at the New York toy fair in 1959.[8]

New ideas come from creative thinking. There are numerous definitions of creativity, but the following ones capture the essence of creativity and of a creative person:

Creativity is the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain.

A creative person is one who has insight, who can see things nobody else has ever seen before, who hears things nobody has heard before.[9]

There was a time when we thought that creativity was the domain of a few gifted individuals. That may have been true in some instances in the past, but Stanford professor and IDEO (the global design company) partner Diego Rodriguez cautions us to be wary of the "lone inventor myth" in today's world.[10] We now know that creativity in organizations is most often the result of multiple inputs and that creativity in groups and individuals can be developed and nurtured.[11]

The following story tells how an environment encouraged people to think differently and how it contributed to one of the most influential innovations of our time.

It was October 7, 1957, and physicists William Guier and George Weiffenbach were engaged in deep discussion in the cafeteria of the Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) of Johns Hopkins University. They were talking about the announcement over the weekend of the launch of *Sputnik 1*, the first artificial satellite. They wondered if anyone at APL had managed to capture (with the lab's equipment) the signal the Soviets had engineered into the satellite. After determining that no one had, they used a radio wave analyzer and a tape recorder to capture the 20 MHz signal. They had included time stamps with each recording and realized they could use the Doppler effect to calculate the speed at which the satellite was moving. (The Doppler effect is the predictable way the frequency of a wave changes when its source is in motion. You can hear the Doppler effect when a vehicle with a siren moves past you and the sound slides down in pitch.) As word spread around the APL, a steady stream of scientists came by Weiffenbach's office to hear the electronic beeps. Because *Sputnik* was emitting a steady signal and the receiver was stationary, Guier and Weiffenbach realized that they could calculate the movement of the satellite and ultimately its track. In the following weeks, a loose network of scientists helped fill in the details on orbiting bodies and refine the theory. With the use of one of the early computers, a UNIVAC, they were able to plot a complete description of *Sputnik*'s orbit based on the simple 20 MHz beeps. In the spring of 1958, Frank McClure, then director of APL, asked the men confidentially if they could reverse the question; as opposed to calculating the exact position of a satellite from a fixed position on the ground, could they calculate the position of a receiver on the ground if they knew the position of the satellite? Within a few days Gruier and Weiffenbach had

solved the inverse problem. It turns out that McClure had good reason for asking the question as the military was developing the Polaris nuclear missiles, and they needed to know the precise location of submarines in order calculate accurate trajectories for the missiles. The system, called Transit, was developed by the new APL Space Department and allowed the Navy to steer its ships using satellite technology. In 1983 President Ronald Reagan declared that satellite navigation should be a common good and opened it up to civilian use. Now, almost 60 years after the development of Transit, there are 68 satellites in the GPS system, which allows ships and airplanes to navigate to their destinations and you and me to locate the nearest coffee shop with our mobile phones.[12]

In designing Transit, Guier and Weiffenbach had the expertise and intrinsic motivation to come up with a creative solution. They also enjoyed an environment of collegial collaboration that gave them an extra boost, something that I discuss in more detail in the chapters ahead. While both expertise and motivation are important elements of creativity, the most exciting new developments have been on the creative thinking component of creative performance. We have recently come to understand that an important way in which creative thinking develops is through significant multicultural experience, that is, experience with other cultures leads to more creativity.

In 2009 Will Maddux and Adam Galinksy published the report of an experiment that showed empirically that experience in a foreign country leads to creativity.[13] Their study was inspired by the widely held assumption that a period of living abroad was required for the development of aspiring artists. This assumption was based on anecdotal evidence such as Hemingway's penning

of *The Old Man and the Sea* in Cuba, and that much of Gauguin's best work was inspired by living in Tahiti, or the fact that Handel composed the *Messiah* while living in England and many other such stories.

> The experiment involved 205 MBA students of whom 66 percent had lived in a foreign country and 98.5 percent had traveled abroad. The students were given a creative task called the Duncker candle problem in which they were shown a picture containing several objects on a table: a candle, a pack of matches, and a box containing tacks.[14] The problem is to figure out how to attach the candle to the wall by using all the objects on the table so that it burns properly and does not drip wax on the table or the floor. The correct solution requires the participant to empty the box of tacks, use the tacks to attach the box to the wall, and use melted candle wax to attach the candle to the box. The problem requires creative thinking in that it involves the ability to consider objects as performing other than their usual function (the box as a candle holder as opposed to a receptacle for tacks).
>
> Of the 205 students, 111 solved the problem correctly. More importantly, the study found a positive relationship (after controlling for such things as age, gender, and nationality) between the amount of time individuals had *lived* in a foreign country and their ability to solve the problem correctly. However, it found a negative relationship between time spent *traveling* abroad and the ability to come up with a creative solution.

This experiment tells us that while multicultural experience leads to creativity, it doesn't do so for everyone and for every type of multicultural experience. Not everyone who travels to

a foreign country, even for an extended period of time, develops the multicultural mind required for creative performance. Unfortunately, it's more complicated than that. That brings us back to the likes of Ghosn, Baer, Huffington, and Kent and the seemingly almost automatic way in which these multicultural individuals developed a multicultural mind.

## Multiculturals

Multiculturals are individuals who identify with more than one culture. They have been exposed to and taken on board the values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about appropriate behavior of multiple cultures. This occurs naturally in individuals who grow up in multicultural families, where their parents are from two different cultures, or when an individual grows up in two or more different cultures. Some multiculturals (Ghosn, Baer, Huffington, and Kent for example) are able to manage their multiple identities successfully and take advantage of the multicultural minds they have developed over time. However, others (discussed in chapter 4) do not manage their conflicting identities well and are not able to take advantage of their unique skills and abilities. Understanding that there is not one type of multicultural person is an important starting point for organizations that want to get the most from this growing demographic. In 2010 Wayson Choy, a Chinese Canadian novelist, gave a keynote speech on multiculturalism in Canada. In his speech Choy described multiculturals as being like composite materials. These materials are used in particular types of manufacturing because they are lighter, stronger, cheaper, or more flexible, which makes them particularly well suited to their specific task.

However, they require much work to develop. Like composite materials, multicultural individuals may have skills and abilities that are particularly well suited to the global business environment, but they need help to recognize and develop these skills, and they must be well matched to their organizational roles.[15]

## Multiculturals in Organizations

Much research and practice regarding the management of diversity in organizations assumes that individuals have only one cultural profile. For example, we have been concerned with the issue that Hispanics and Anglos might have a different orientation to time or that Asians and westerners might view hierarchy and power relationships differently. Understanding these differences and how they affect behavior is important.[16] However, once we recognize the presence of multiculturals in organizations, we are presented with an entirely new way of thinking about cultural diversity. Realizing that cultural diversity exists within individuals as well as within organizations challenges many of our assumptions about managing diversity at the organizational level and also presents opportunities for organizational development. The most important issues for multiculturals may not be the conflict that exists between groups but the conflict among the values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about appropriate behavior that exist within themselves.[17]

Organizations must foster cultures in which the diversity that exists *within* individuals is recognized in the same way that we have come to treat cultural diversity *between* individuals as a valuable asset. This means that these culturally complex individuals are integrated into knowledge-sharing and decision-

making systems. We must help them to develop and then use their multicultural minds to help organizations come up with the creative solutions they need.

Creativity and innovation are not the same things. The most creative idea that is not implemented does not result in innovation. The creative spark that allowed Ruth Handler to recognize the potential in the Barbie doll came to fruition only after she saw the development of a similar idea in a foreign context and gained acceptance from the founders of Mattel. Innovation requires the ability to see problems in new ways and to know which ideas are worth pursuing. But it also requires the ability to sell other people on the value of the idea.[18] Organizations can benefit from multicultural minds, as we've seen in the APL example, only if they provide opportunities for the creativity of multiculturals to be unleashed and for them to assume appropriate roles in the process of innovation. Organizations must understand multiculturals and engage with them in order to create an environment that leverages their unique skills and abilities and then model the multicultural experience for all employees.

## Summary

The forces of globalization that have created the superheated competitive environment that organizations now face have also provided a resource to address the problem. The flattening of the world has given more people the opportunity to experience other cultures, as a result of both migration and growing up in a multicultural environment. As a result, there are many more people with multicultural identities in today's organizations. This significant experience with other cultures is important because it leads to more creative thinking. Creative thinking, along

with appropriate expertise and intrinsic motivation, are the key components of creative performance. However, to achieve innovation creative ideas must not only be generated, they must be implemented. Both the generation and implementation of creative solutions to problems requires that organizations find ways to leverage the unique talents of their multiculturals and their culturally diverse workforce. To do this they must understand the multicultural mind and create an environment where it can reach its full potential. Understanding the multicultural mind begins with understanding the influence of culture on individuals. That is the subject of the next chapter.

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