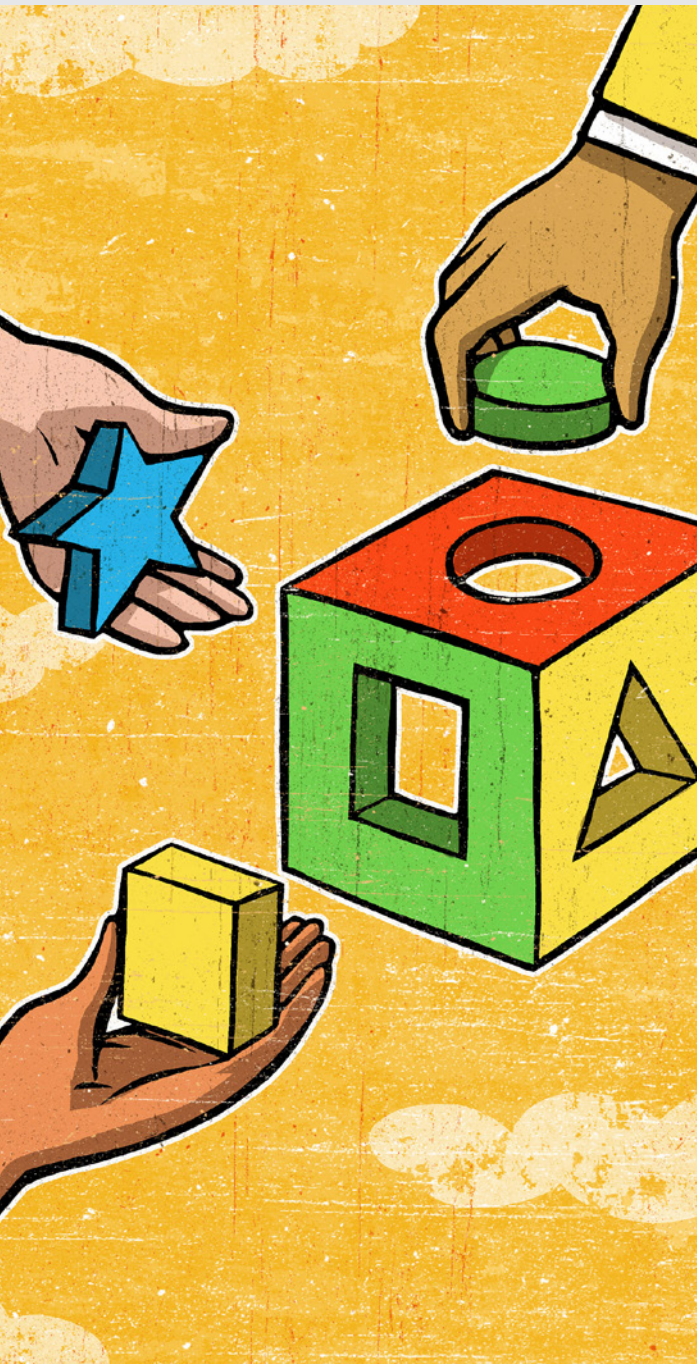# Enemy Number One: Rhetoric

*by Simona Cuomo**

Diversity Management (DM), understood as a set of policies, practices, and actions that, in the context of human resources management, are aimed at managing the diversity of workers, began its entry and spread in Europe and Italy starting at the end of the 1990s through branches of large companies from the English-speaking world. Currently, abetted above all by the health emergency that has contributed to giving visibility to the limited attention focused on the issue of diversity, DM has spread in most industrialized countries. What is known as the "She-cession,"[1] that describes the strong impact the pandemic has had on women both professionally and socially, has stirred considerable media attention, contributing to bringing new attention to the subject.

The Dossier of this number of *Economia&Management*, to which this article represents an introduction, offers an opportunity to take stock and reflect on the critical elements and contradictions that this management approach entails.

THE LABEL AND LEGITIMACY

The concept of "diversity management" was born in the United States as a sort of reformulation of the previous programs of positive actions that, until the 80s, were principally aimed at promoting employment and career development for Black workers (and later, for female workers). Introduced as a way to guarantee equal opportunity and to combat racial and gender discrimination, the concept was depoliticized when it entered the business world. This led to the gradual substitution of the concept of equal opportunity with that of "Diversity Management," whose English label is also adopted in Italy, simultaneously leading to a change in perspective.

* Simona Cuomo *is an Associate Professor of Practice of Leadership, Organization & Human Resources and Coordinator of the Diversity, Inclusion & Smart working Observatory at the SDA Bocconi.*

Combatting discrimination through the promotion of equal treatment, equal opportunity, and fighting for equality was perceived, in political programs, as an end in itself, an ethical more than factual approach. DM did not completely depart from the moral end, but equality took on more the status of a desirable side-effect, compared to the emphasis given to the expected economic impact. So it is an advantage that can be quantified with economic-financial indicators, presumably to be derived from the proper management of a workforce that for socio-demographic reasons is becoming increasingly diversified.

The legitimacy of DM is still affected by this instrumental vision based on which the diversity of the workforce is an antidote to the conformism of decision-making processes and thus can create greater innovation and higher levels of performance. Some studies in fact show that heterogeneous groups (in terms of both skills and social composition) can exceed uniform groups in the resolution of complex problems, only if the diversity is channeled. It is not so much diversity itself that contributes to better organizational performance, but rather, diversity that is adequately managed. While studies show the impact of diversity on environmental variables – such as psychological security, job satisfaction, emotional commitment, etc.[2] – it is very complex to quantify their economic value, and perhaps it is not even desirable to give it such a central role. Would it be right to stop pursuing these goals if we knew that the company didn't receive any economic benefits?

In recent years, the label of D&I (Diversity&Inclusion) has been gradually replacing that of DM in managerial practice. The concept of inclusion seeks to recover the ethical dimension that the business case for diversity, underlying the previous definition, had pushed into the background. Recovering moral legitimacy is situated within the increasingly topical and widespread discussion of corporate social responsibility (CSR), strictly related to the idea that organizations have some type of responsibility towards individuals, society, and humanity. Under the label of D&I, a goal is set to manage workers based on a meritocratic perspective: to include means to overcome a state of inequality that is expressed principally in a different representation of the various dimensions of diversity in the different roles and hierarchical levels of a company. In Western countries, the top positions are in fact principally occupied by heterosexual, male, white managers, without children and in good health.[3] A possible explanation is that it has been easier for them to obtain access to the necessary resources to compete for positions of power and prestige, benefitting from a stereotyped reputation regarding their better ability to hold these positions. This social representation of places of power shows that, underlying the concept of diversity, there is a hegemonic cultural model. There-

fore, the contrast does not take place between different social groups, but in relation to the dominant group, that becomes a parameter of reference and a norm for the others.

To include thus means putting each worker in the best conditions (in terms of environment and resources) to fully express their potential skills and abilities, to perform their work in the best way possible and thus be able to compete based on merit. This approach could function as an accelerator to overcome the non-representative character of certain categories in certain roles and organizational positions, offering new models of roles and leadership styles at the same time.

BETWEEN ESSENTIALISM AND INTERSECTIONALITY

When we speak of diversity, it is important to remember that, at least conceptually, there are an infinite number of dimensions of diversity. Diversity can include any dimension (or category) based on which people share (or, to the contrary, differ in) a specific manifestation of that dimension with each other. To make this infinite potential of characteristics of workers' identities intelligible and concretely manageable, Plummer[4] coined the expression "Big 8," to stress that diversity can be reduced to eight dimensions: age, ethnicity/nationality, gender, mental/physical skills, organizational role/function, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

This simplification, that is necessary for understanding of the multiple facets of diversity, risks being adopted in a simplistic and ecumenical manner. First of all, that classification was born in America and thus may not be valid in other cultural contexts. In fact, depending on the specific socio-cultural context, some dimensions, but not others, could be crucial for processes of inclusion/exclusion. Moreover, in both academic discourse and diversity management practice, there is a focus on a few categories: gender in Europe, ethnicity and gender in the United States.

One reason for this narrowing of the focus can be found in the different power of the various social movements that promote the inclusion of specific dimensions in specific national contexts; moreover, companies often prefer to start with the category that is most present and visible in numerical terms. The practice of giving priority to certain dimensions, while apparently more efficient from a managerial perspective, implies a potential negative effect deriving from prejudices, resistance, and conflicts that can arise in both those who are excluded from these programs ("they are only promoting her because she's a woman") and among the beneficiaries themselves ("I don't want to participate in a program for only women"). Furthermore, this simplification risks producing basic categories: people are seen as abstract, the category becomes a predictor

of certain needs, preferences, and behaviors; the complexity of each category is no longer seen, and there is an emphasis on uniformity rather than differences. Lastly, we must not ignore the fact that the focus on some dimensions and not others highlights that those dimensions are accepted as relevant or legitimate.

THE QUESTION OF GENDER

Let us take the example of the category of gender. When we speak of men and women, we distinguish between sex and gender to differentiate the cultural and socially constructed aspect of being a man or a woman (i.e. gender) and the bodily and biological aspect. For a long time this classification drove an essentially binary construction of male and female, and although the concept of gender leaves open the possibility to question the "male versus female" dichotomy, in practice this rarely happened. The dichotomy provoked resistance and impeded collaboration between men and women and the construction of a context in which male and female could be integrated. Moreover, that contrast was strengthened by the fact that gender initiatives often aim to support "biological" women above all in their path of development in the organizational hierarchy, which implies the need to redistribute resources between the two biological sexes. The sharp distinction between men and women, femininity and masculinity, can also be considered as one of the reasons for still-present marginalization of other dimensions that regard gender identity. Intersexuality and transgenderism have been entered into the category of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex); but since they are not sexual orientations, this classification has constructed their status as "neglected" within a category that per se is subordinated to that of man/woman. Furthermore, a dichotomous approach to categories does not allow for interpreting the intersectionality between categories. The concept of intersectionality takes into account the complexity of each person, because in reality a man is never only a man and a woman never only a woman; he or she also has a certain age, skin, color, origin, mother-tongue, sexual orientation, different gender identities, and so on. Even if there are differences between these dimensions in terms of visibility and representativity within a certain workforce, this should not change how they are listened to and taken into consideration. Without this method of observation, identities are conceptualized as objective, stable, clearly-defined, and easy-to-measure realities. Yet by shutting people into a single category, there is a risk of reproducing the same prejudices and asymmetries which are to be fought. In reality, inequalities overlap and condition each other, producing other inequalities. In the context of the discussion of gender, for example, DM policies and practices have been mostly oriented towards supporting the careers of white women, from the middle class, who are educated and occupy a privileged position in the category of women, and little has been done for lesbian women, immigrant women, elderly women, sick women, etc. This approach has encouraged single professional women to concentrate on themselves and their aspirations, while losing sight of the important themes for all women and men who, rather than feeling excluded or threatened, could have shared and participated. This approach has produced conflicts and backlashes: envy and rivalry between women; the feeling of rejection and negation of the issue by men ("those are women's problems"; "we treat everyone the same, it's not true that we exclude women, also because on average they are better and more competent").

Understanding diversity through the lens of intersectionality makes it evident that workers often simultaneously have positions of privilege and exclusion, and thus helps overcome the hierarchization between categories of diversity, and with that, the underlying implicit hierarchization of inequalities. A more intersectional approach could encourage organizations to consider more dimensions of diversity of the workforce and to more deeply understand the multiple mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that can simultaneously inhibit the construction of an inclusive work climate. Organizations often shrink from this interpretation, whether due to an efficiency mindset focused on small steps ("concentrate resources and programs on what is immediately visible and urgent; I have to produce results in a short time"), or because complexity is frightening, or because that complexity is often denied ("we don't have this problem, we don't have intersex employees").

THE RHETORIC OF DIVERSITY

Discourse on diversity management and inclusion, in both businesses and society, is subject to a great deal of rhetoric that obscures and overshadows the real difficulties and potential conflicts that the construction of an inclusive culture entails.

A thin veneer of "politically correct" masks what happens concretely in relationships between people who deal with diversity. I have yet to meet someone who

defines themselves openly as against inclusion. To the contrary, people say they are open and neutral without admitting the inevitable partiality of their judgment and their rigidities. It is difficult to be aware of the cognitive, and especially emotional commitment that dealing with diversity entails; a commitment necessary to process that feeling of irritation, or worse, rejection, that emerges when the other has tastes, preferences, habits, ideas and thoughts that are different. Recognizing this ambivalence between verbal acceptance of diversity and emotional resistance, that is often unconscious, is an important step to move away from the adoption of DM rhetoric and towards substantive adoption of a new approach, where words and statements correspond to actual inclusive behavior and actions.

There are both mental and sociological reasons for this resistance. On a psychological level, we can trace it to the process of construction of identity (both individual and collective). In order to be built, identity needs to define borders between the self and others, between us and them. The borders of identity need to be defended, to avoid the fragility of identity and its dispersion. Negative emotions (the irritation, rage, or fear we feel) are useful as a signal to protect identity. But if these emotions are not conscious and as a consequence are not processed, they become fertile ground for the construction of negative thoughts and judgments towards those who are different. These judgments, that go from dissent to hostility, are the cause of direct conflicts (verbal or physical aggression; exclusion or discrimination) or indirect conflicts (indirect signs of disapproval, indifference, avoidance, etc.) that develop in personal and professional relationships. Inclusion implies recognizing the borders of identity, understanding their function and the decision to mix, enrich, and supplement them with those of other identities, without the fear of feeling diminished or weakened. Inclusion is often confused with tolerance, but in tolerance borders remain. When borders become barriers and then trenches, judgments go from being partial and questionable to being absolute. But it is precisely the rigidity of these barriers that does not allow for recognizing diversity and otherness as tools of individual and social growth and development.

In terms of historic-social motivations, it is important to recall that cultural freedom is a recent stage in the progress and development of humanity; being able to choose one's identity – who you are – is the precondition for satisfying the highest need for human development, that of self-realization. Once the basic needs linked to survival and safety are met, people can aspire to the freedom of openly professing their religion, speaking their language, celebrating their ethnic heritage, expressing their gender identity without the fear of being ridiculed, or worse, of being punished or excluded and not having the same opportunities. In this phase of social development, people aim to live without having to deny their chosen identity and culture and being able to express it in the various relationships they experience over time. It is this characteristic that must be understood as a wealth, and not a threat for (individual and collective) identity.

In the current situation, the ideology of equality, while historically decisive to overcome the supremacy and hegemony of Western states and cultures, risks becoming a limit. "I don't want to be chosen as a woman but as a person," is one of the recurring thoughts that confuse the principle of equality, based on which people have the same rights and responsibilities, with equality of identity. When we speak of (individual and collective) identity, diversity becomes an intrinsic and pervasive factor; abetted by the social change underway, whether at a demographic level – from phenomena of migration to the gradual aging of the population, to the fall in the birth rate – or in the world of work, or on a legislative level. The expansion of cultural freedom thus represents a crucial goal for today's society. While on the one hand, in order to become citizens of heterogeneous societies, people must free themselves of rigid identities, on the other, institutions and businesses need to play a politically active role to create the conditions necessary to guarantee equal opportunity for everyone, to defend the cosmopolitan values of tolerance and respect for universal human rights, and to remove social, cultural, and economic disparities.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Organizations that embrace diversity management should take on the commitment to manage and overcome the discrimination present in the workplace. Obstacles and cultural prejudice that do not allow for sufficiently personalized policies and management practices, thus allowing all workers the same opportunity for access to material and immaterial resources, should be removed as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the data on the spread and adoption of policies and practices supporting D&I in Italy is not so encouraging.[5] However, to continue with greater conviction on

the path of adoption of inclusive practices, it is necessary to:

- remember that the element of convenience cannot be the only dimension to emphasize. Moreover, the management of diversity is not always immediately advantageous. Other tools can be embraced: social responsibility, importance of quality of life at work, organizational well-being, innovation, and cultural freedom;
- favor initiatives that are structured through a more subtle understanding of the relationships between people and working groups, and that therefore take into account the specificity of national and socio-organizational cultures, the relevant legislative context, and the specific demographic composition of workers, avoiding critically proposing solutions already attempted in other situations;
- proposing a new conceptualization of diversity in favor of the idea of the plurality of differences: we are different from each other, but we are also different form ourselves in different phases of life. Diversities intersect and generate many nuances, beyond categories;
- incentivize a path of awareness, individual and collective self-reflection that leads to questioning the rigidity of one's own identity and cultural model; it is visible that, especially those who have been able to access positions of organizational and social power, tend to define their own model as unique and preferable for the majority;
- abandon a sporadic approach based on individual effort to adopt a structural approach that involves the majority of the workers and combines the adoption of D&I policies and practices with broader actions to promote an inclusive environment.

The articles in the dossier examine these themes analyzing aspects that come under the label of "Diversity and Inclusion," but are addressed in relation to the Italian and European context.

In recent years, in managerial literature the need has emerged to analyze the form the theme takes in different contexts; likewise, companies themselves realize the need to find models and policies that are consistent with the contexts in which they operate, since the indiscriminate application of projects conceived for other countries causes a loss of efficacy of managerial actions.

Therefore, the decision to address in the dossier specific dimensions of diversity and the role of certain actors is the result of the need to find responses (or generate questions) that are coherent with our context.

Naturally, the dossier also deals with more general questions, since some problems emerge regularly when we speak of discrimination in the workplace.

In the first session of the dossier, "Scenarios and challenges," the first two articles address the issue of inclusion from a critical perspective: Simonella focuses on the boomerang effect and other resistance encountered when policies and practices supporting inclusion are introduced; Basaglia guides us in reflecting on the theme of conflicts, reminding us that the construction of an inclusive climate is not simple because the process to achieve it can be rent with conflicts, tensions, and contradictions due to the greater heterogeneity (social, cultural, age, etc.) of the workers. Finally, Profeta discusses whether public policies in favor of gender parity represent an indispensable investment for rebirth after the pandemic crisis, and highlights the binary relationship that exists between public policies as a driver of gender parity and female leadership that in turn can promote policies in favor of the reduction of the gender gap.

In the second section of the dossier, "Businesses, Society, and Law," the articles by Pulcher, Cuomo-Simonella, and Monaci describe the state of the art of those dimensions of diversity that have received less attention than others in relation to the issue of workplace discrimination. In particular, Pulcher reflects on

sexual orientation and gender identity bringing attention to the role of labor unions, an actor that for too long has been excluded from diversity management in organizations; Cuomo-Simonella focus on the climate of distrust that has been constructed towards workers with disabilities, that prevents companies from constructing effective processes of inclusion and development; Monaci addresses the question of migrants and work, proposing a vision that goes well beyond that of complementarity, based on which migrants are used in low-skill jobs, no longer desired by Italian workers.

Three articles are dedicated to the theme of women and gender discrimination in the labor market. Casarico addresses the gender pay gap, highlighting the need for companies to adopt a reporting system that generates greater transparency in their occupational and pay structure from a gender standpoint, as happens in other European countries; Saporito-Rota-Trinchero stress that the social motivation to serve the public – instead of working for the private sector – is the main factor of attraction for women in the public administration. However, although women are the majority, even in the PA their careers progress less than those of men. Galizzi brings clarity to the question of gender balance, explaining what it is and how until today it has been applied mainly in public administrations. An important driver for its modernization could be the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), that has placed it among the tools necessary to reduce the gender gap in our country.

After a brief historical reconstruction of anti-discrimination law, Lorenzetti describes positive and negative points, highlighting, on the one hand, how this body of laws does not stress, if not weakly, discrimination in an intersectional form; and on the other hand, how the Italian legal system has acted to transpose the European directives without any effort of recomposition and coordination with the prior Italian laws.

[1] *"Donna e straniera: ecco chi paga la crisi da pandemia"*, lavoce.info, *June 10, 2021;* "Shecession, effetto Covid sull'uguaglianza di genere", Huffington Post, *February 10, 2021.*

[2] *A. Randel, E. Randela, B.M. Galvinb, L.M. Shorec, K. Holcombe Ehrharta, B.C. Chunga, A. Deana, U. Kedharnathd, "Inclusive Leadership: Realizing Positive Outcomes Through Belongingness and Being Valued for Uniqueness,"* Human Resource Management Review, *28(2), 2017, pp. 190-203; S.B. Choi, T.B.H. Tran, B.I. Park, "Inclusive Leaderrship and Work Engagement: Mediating Roles of Affective Organizational Commitment and Creativity,"* Social Behavior and Personality, *43(6), 2015, pp. 931-944.*

[3] *S. Basaglia, C. Paolino, Z. Simonella, "The last call. L'adozione del DM e l'insostenibile ritardo delle imprese italiane,"* Economia&Management, *2015-2, pp. 42-49.*

[4] *D.L. Plummer (editor),* Handbook of Diversity Management: Beyond Awareness to Competency Based Learning, *Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003.*

[5] *Basaglia, Paolino, Simonella, op. cit.; see also "Il diversity management per le diversità LGBT+ e le azioni per rendere gli ambienti di lavoro più inclusivi," ISTAT, 2019.*

SYNOPSIS

- In recent years, the label of Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) is gradually substituting that of Diversity Management, including managerial practice. The concept of inclusion stresses the importance of recovering the ethical dimension within discourse on diversity, a passage that in the context of the broader reflection on corporate social responsibility (CSI), underscores how companies have great responsibility towards individuals, society, and humanity.

- When we speak of diversity, it is important to remember that, at least conceptually, there are an infinite number of dimensions of diversity. A more intersectional approach – that is more conscious of that multiplicity – could encourage organizations to consider more dimensions of diversity of the workforce and to more deeply understand the multiple mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that can simultaneously inhibit the construction of an inclusive work climate.

- The organizations that embrace diversity management should commit to managing and overcoming the discrimination present in the workplace through a new conceptualization of diversity that favors the idea of its plurality and the adoption of policies to foster awareness among employees and practices that are structural, no longer only sporadic.