

Bond, M. A. (2007). *Workplace Chemistry: promoting diversity through organizational change*. University Press of New England: Lebanon NH

Dr Angela Carter

Co-editor EWOPinPractice

This attractive 256 page hardback¹ details the seven-year history of organizational change in a US chemical manufacturing company that aimed to make it an equitable, efficient and diverse workplace.

Bond's co-researchers (Thomas and Ely) emphasised the integration of three approaches to motivate managers to diversify their staffing: a) the fair treatment for all agenda; b) the ability to read and develop niche markets; and c) the ability to integrate and learn through organizational systems and functions to appreciate the benefits of diversity to be realised. The author was assisted by an economist, a training consultant and a group of students and some university seed funding to develop this work; and was guided during a sabbatical year by a women's writing group to produce the story as a publication.

The metaphor of a chemical reaction is used to describe relationships between people – “good” chemistry when people mix and complement each other and “bad” chemistry when personal elements collide. While friendships can be chosen on chemistry workplace relationships throw people together from diverse environments and orientations. The challenge for organizations is to develop a context that will support worker diversity in a complementary manner enabling effective working.

Bond, a professor of psychology, uses the framework of ecological theory to explore the change process. This focuses on the multiplicity of experiences occurring to resources within a system as they develop and change at individual, team, organizational and societal levels.

The story commences in 1995 when ChemPro (a pseudonym) employed 211 people of which 70% were white men. Women and minority workers were segregated in specific job roles and departments. ChemPro was aware of increasing local competition for potential workers, and the need to develop a slimmer workforce more able to work effectively together and across boundaries. This need emphasised the importance of developing an increasingly diverse workforce with interpersonal skills that would foster positive relationships.

The workplace chemistry initiative had three interwoven dimensions; a) diversity activities supported by assessment of the diversity climate, interviews and departmental-level feedback exploring inequities of women and non-whites; b) team capacity building and training supported by communication and leadership development, facilitation of strategic planning and conflict resolution; and c) institutionalisation of the value of diversity championed by a steering team overseeing the weaving of diversity into selection, socialisation, evaluation and succession planning.

In 2003, when the collaboration with Bond ended, the company had more men and women of colour; with some in leadership positions. The Board had increased its female membership to 50% (previously it had only 14% women). This long-term case study offers a realistic example of the change process. While significant challenges still remained within the organization the employees felt better supported and were more satisfied with their jobs.

¹ Available from Amazon for \$29.95.

Evaluation

I found this an accessible book, written in an engaging style that was not overly detailed with academic material while still offering support to the frameworks and arguments used. Further, the inclusion of an economic argument brought depth to the description. Bond appreciates the multiple dimensions of diversity and was clearly working with multiple elements. However, the book focused mainly on aspects of race and gender increasing the clarity of descriptions.

The introduction had helpful tabular descriptions of the various sections allowing the reader to dip in and out of the book. The long-term nature of the case study enabled description of unplanned events such as reorganisation and downsizing common place in organizational life to be explored. The author acknowledged the difficulties the company had sustaining regular training programmes and described strategies used to keep diversity issues alive. The intervention activities were fully described; along with the participants, evaluations, reactions and reflections. In-keeping with the traditions of participant enquiry Bond explored the possible advantages of being a female consultant that may have helped others reveal their vulnerability; that may have been more difficult for a male consultant.

However, I found the supporting notes too brief to be helpful (often just giving the names of the authors and little detail about the context of the study mentioned) requiring you to refer to the reference section for details of the publication or appendices. I found the introductory chapter, while carefully signposted, over long and contained too much information about the models and theories used as well as explanation of the research and consultancy relationship with ChemPro. I feel this would have been better divided into separate chapters helping the non-academic reader to maintain their interest. In addition, subsequent chapters were also long and detailed, and may also have benefited from some sub-divisions. I found information about the number and activities of the consultants in the various parts of the intervention missing; this would have deepened the understanding of the practical nature of this work.

In summary, I found this an extremely useful book for those involved in diversity investigation and change management. Bond had hoped to give lessons and insights for practitioners and researchers in this field and I feel she has accomplished this task admirably.

3 May 2008