

# Book Review

## *Stepping Up: Lead Culture Change for Diversity and Growth in the Asian Century.*

By P. Young.

Sydney: Growthcurv, 2013. 384 pp. \$44. ISBN 978 0 9874 1200 3

The call for greater diversity in our workplaces has swelled across Australian managerial and public policy contexts since the early 1990s. Despite the seeming popularity of diversity, representation of women and racial minorities in positions of leadership remains abysmally low. In *Stepping Up*, Pamela Young boldly points out the social inequalities that hinder the progression of certain people in business and society. The book is written for leaders and presents the voices of 100 of their peers, predominantly those working in Australia or from Australia working in Asia.

I commend Young for her unapologetic critique of Australia's ingrained sexism and racism. By naming the bigotry that pervades work and social relations in Australian society, Young provides one of the most persuasive cases to begin creating a more hospitable world. I share and support Young's vision for how we currently understand and foster 'diversity' to be transformed so that all Australians have the opportunity for work progression.

As a leadership academic, I find the book limited in its theoretical basis. The problem and solution to Australia's lack of diversity are found in Schein's (1992) cultural levels model where organisational culture is delineated into (1) observable 'artefacts' and behaviours, (2) stated values, beliefs, and attitudes, and (3) underlying implicit assumptions. This model is also problematically transposed onto the national and individual levels. Young suggests that the key to diversity is cultural change, which is achieved by disrupting the "cultural circuit" represented by the links between individual, organisational, and national cultures (p. 17). Contemporary theories of organisational culture have highlighted the reductionistic conceptualisation of cultural levels, and have begun to conceive of culture as something organisations are, not something organisations have that can be changed at will (Sinclair, 1993; Western, 2012).

The idea that countries equally 'have' a unique, measurable culture has also been called into question for simplifying and generalising traits and behaviours across a country as though all its inhabitants are the same. More critically, the cross-cultural management theories that Young draws on, including the substantive, pioneering work of Geert Hofstede (p. 232–235), have been compellingly argued to be Western tools of colonisation that impose Western-centric frameworks of knowledge onto other countries (Kwek, 2003).

Although the book showcases rich, revealing quotes from leaders, the lack of analysis of these quotes misses a key opportunity to delve deeper into ideas about diversity. For example, quotes from some of the leaders, such as Neil Cockroft, who said “we have not integrated vertically (maybe horizontally)” (p. 101), suggest that class inequality may be hindering our progression towards a more just and inclusive society. Classist assumptions are reflected in one leader’s case for racial diversity as allowing Asian female migrants to come to Australia to work as maids (p. 27) and another’s call for selection processes that take into consideration extracurricular work, volunteer work, and leadership initiatives (p. 331). While appearing to be in support of diversity on the surface, some of the quotes from leaders indicate that difference will only be tolerated on their terms and among those who share the same economic privileges.

Other leaders interviewed suggest that the ‘solution’ to diversity will “take a generation” (p. 330) and requires “a generational shift to fix” (p. 105). Similarly, another leader finds hope among “Gen X men”, whom she characterises as having “more experience with women and are better with them” (p. 6). Such discourses among leaders imply that diversity will ‘naturally’ resolve itself over the course of time and may also help explain why progress in diversity across businesses and society is so slow, despite its ostensibly overwhelming support from (largely) white, male, elite class leaders.

Where the book unfailingly comes alive for me is when Young speaks in her own voice to share her personal experiences in learning to embrace diversity. The vivid detail of when she moved from New Zealand to Singapore (Chapter 3) offer keen insights into how her life experiences shaped her openness to difference. Her thoughtful observations of Australian patriarchal values at parties and her son’s school experiences make some of the most convincing arguments in the book of why social change for diversity is both timely and necessary.

A more nuanced framework for the examination of assumptions and practices of diversity might be found in a sociological view of society as comprised of four interlocking political systems that bell hooks (2003: ix) terms the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”. This concept acknowledges the systemic nature of the difficulties with diversity that the leaders in the book face. It also offers a powerful lens to critically re-examine what might appear to be vocal advocacy for gender and racial diversity on the part of leaders, but inadvertently justifies Western and elite class privileges.

Finally, as a book written for business leaders, *Stepping Up* by and large promotes the business case for diversity. However, a focus on economic growth and business productivity can undermine the ethical case of co-creating a more just world. In particular, the book has a tendency to reproduce the discourse that Asians are resources to be exploited to Australia’s advantage in ‘the Asian Century’. The notion that leaders could figure out how to better “use the Asian students that are here” (p. 330) and that there is an “opportunity” for leaders to learn our language and customs in order to have greater business success (Chapter 4) demonstrates the inherent tension of trying to promote diversity in white, Western-centric terms.

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## References

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