

## Unprecedented voices: the main contribution of the 21st century to the construction of critical thinking

My grandmother was a brilliant woman who could only write her name, my mother another intelligent woman who did not study beyond Middle School. I was the first in my family to graduate from an elite university and this climb made me see even more deeply the lack of poor and black people in positions of power and thought-building. The classrooms at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) were mostly white, except for my chair and one or two other people who managed to break the line and get there. It was like that throughout my school life, since I attended private schools because of the military pension left by my grandfather and, in these privileged places, the black presence was not more than 10% to 15% of the classroom.

From the point of view of those who live in a developing country, in which the lower classes have recently won the right to see their children graduated from universities and, therefore, inserted in the most influential sectors of society, I point to diversity as the most striking feature of the 21st century in the construction of critical thinking by new leaders. Although we still have a long way to go, the truth is that this is the moment where diversity is at its highest point in history and, consequently, in companies. If we think that a hundred years ago we had no women or black people holding a high political position, an important military position or the presidency of a large corporation, we will see that we are under an unprecedented reality in terms of voices to be heard before the construction of critical thinking.

A hundred years ago my voice as a black woman would not be heard and, probably, I could hardly contribute to the board of the multinational company where I work. But it is not what happens today. As a journalist, I never imagined that people management would be the future of my career, but after three years as a reporter I received my first project and team to manage. Both in this first project, as in all others that I have led since then, the company was able to benefit from a quality that is not in my academic background or curriculum: my identity and life experience.

The first project targeted women from the lower middle class, a place from which I had emerged and with which I would be able to communicate on an equal basis. I was able to help from the beginning, working together with my leaders who were designing the project and giving my opinion on what that type of woman would like to find in a space like that. About a year later, I took on another team as the online content editor for The Body Shop in Brazil, a brand that is known worldwide for its concern with social causes involving race, gender, sexuality and the environment. Being a black woman once again put me in the position of being able to help the company, being a voice that would know how to deal with these issues in a pertinent

way and without the possible misunderstandings committed by someone who speaks "outside" the situation.

Today I coordinate the editorial team of my company's largest website, a gastronomic platform that reached 100 million monthly visits in April this year - something equivalent to almost 50% of the country's population. In this project we publish weekly videos and, as audiovisual is an expensive content, knowing what the end consumer - who is from the lower middle class and very similar to my mother - wants to see, prevents us from losing a few thousand dollars in content that nobody will see. All these issues of applied diversity that have surrounded my career until today, represent a little of what I want to talk about with this essay, pointing out that a plural profile is what our companies and leaders need to understand their audiences and build thoughts that will lead to embracing and accurate decisions.

### **Diversity as a powerful tool in corporate growth**

Analyzing the importance of diversity for building a leader's critical thinking is a great opportunity to prove that the inclusion of people outside the white male model in senior corporate positions is not a matter of charity, it is a great opportunity for innovation and profit . Research from Arizona University reveals that companies that have women in senior management positions experience something called "innovation intensity" and produce an average of 20% more patents than teams led by male leaders.<sup>1</sup> This is because diversity generates divergence and this divergence needs to lead to a discussion that, for sure, will lead to a higher level of knowledge than what you had before.

Peter Drucker lived most of his life in a society that was not as plural as that of the 21st century, but still defended throughout his career that pluralism and diversity in companies were a key factor for innovation and growth. In *The Efficient Executive*, Drucker tells of an executive who, seeing a meeting reach a premature general agreement, unexpectedly interrupted the meeting by saying: "Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on decision here. I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement"<sup>2</sup>. The author called this "organized disagreement", a thought-provoking tool that can make great use of the presence of individuals with diverse lives in the same room.

Investing in a more diverse company brings benefits that go beyond thinking, it is also a way to shield your own internal decisions from errors caused by the lack of knowledge that lies in social separation. When we see scandals in racist advertisements and companies being condemned to take offensive advertising off the air, we wonder how that campaign managed to get out of a room without anyone telling them it was wrong. It is likely that this was because there were no black

people (or women or disabled people) in that room, because there was no diversity to raise a different perspective and encourage critical thinking to go beyond the product, to be concerned with the human part. Surrounding yourself with people with the same life context as yours and with values or opinions similar to yours, "leads to a shrinking of the imagination and understanding" <sup>3</sup>, does not help a leader to identify possible communication and approach errors. The danger is that, in a generation more and more engaged like that of the 21st century, an error can mean boycotts and a blemish on the image that is difficult to recover.

I believe that data on the advantages and profitability of diversity, like the many that McKinsey & Company has released in recent years<sup>4</sup> is important and, in fact, it is only through them that managers are attracted to invest in the idea as Taylor Cox observed in his studies: "We find that in many organizations the rationale that gets the greatest positive response is that managing diversity is necessary in order to leverage an important, but underutilized, resource".<sup>5</sup>

But I also believe in how sharing our experiences can be transformative. As a black woman, the performance of diversity in my work environments has never gone unnoticed. With everything that happened in the pandemic times, for example, the multinational where I work was quick to adjust communication and we started to have a virtual meeting with the CEO, the entire board and the rest of the company once a week - approximately 500 people. The environment created was one of real openness, in which any employee could express himself or ask questions and what was seen was a board benefiting from direct contact with such diverse profiles. At this meeting, it was discussed, for example, what to do with the transport values that were not being used during the home office. People were able to say that food was the greatest need at the moment and that these transportation values could go to the food benefit. The acceptance was unanimous and, for me, this kind of so direct conversation is an inheritance of the teachings that Drucker has defended since the beginning of his career, with concepts such as the decentralization that appears in Concept of the Corporation<sup>6</sup> and the importance of communication between functional groups pointed out in The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order.<sup>7</sup>

In these meetings with the entire company, there was also the possibility for each employee to contribute with ideas on how we could help the community and society as a whole in this time of pandemic. Making it clear that the only thing we couldn't do was spend money, our CEO made our audience of nearly 200 million monthly visits available and called on the 500 employees to give ideas on how we could help. With so many different profiles participating in the conversation, each knew a different need and knew an NGO that needed to be supported. This resulted in a communication plan in which we use our own websites to disseminate banners indicating NGOs and locations that were in need of donation. Through these banners, we have already reached thousands of clicks and donations, in a joint

action that involved people from different economic classes and all levels of management of the company. For me, it is the proof that, when we decide to invest in diversity in the construction of a thought, it has a lot to work out.

### **The main reason**

Beyond the positive results, there is also the truth that diversity does not need to enter companies just because it is a key tool for innovation and for today's leaders to build embracing critical thinking. This needs to be established in companies because it is the right thing to do. In 2018 I covered an event that brings together the most powerful executive women in Brazil as the general director of Kimberly-Clark, the vice president of marketing for PepsiCo and one of the partners of KPMG. The event was all shaped to raise discussions about how to take more women to leadership positions in the country and that, for me, is one of the most beautiful things: the impulse we have, when we get there, to take others with us. Those women were 'purpose driven'<sup>8</sup>, they made it a mission. They were passionate about talking upon diversity and presented proud initiatives they took in their own companies to see reality change. They talked about practical strategies such as reserving a percentage of positions to be held by women and non-white people. They also showed data on how, in some years, they managed to change the appearance of their companies.

A funny fact is that the event lasted two days and, in addition to staying with these women who decide the future of my country, I also made the entire trip back and forth with them. At the end of the trip, the CEO of a large coffee company insisted that I join the group of WhatsApp that had been created for them, and this fact is only relevant because, for two years now, I have been closely monitoring how these women are tireless in promoting diversity in their companies. They did not speak at the lectures at that conference trying to promote themselves, they are people who - like Peter Drucker - believe that "management must become the instrument through which cultural diversity can be made to serve the common purposes of mankind."<sup>9</sup> They do this because they are women, because they know the path they had to explore, but mainly because using their positions for this purpose is the right thing.

A hundred years ago we could not dream of women leading the largest food and logistics companies in the country. Only 132 years ago, black people did not even dream of freedom in my country yet. We need to remember that the 21st century is our most open and diverse moment as a society in the history of the world and to take advantage of what this new reality can bring to our ways of thinking.

### **References**

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Drucker 'The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done' (2006)

<sup>3</sup> João Bosco Lodi 'Introdução à obra de Peter F. Drucker' (1968)

<sup>4</sup> Karsten Strauss, 'More Evidence That Company Diversity Leads To Better Profits', Forbes, 5 jan 2018

<sup>5</sup> Taylor Cox, Ruby L. Beale 'Developing Competency to Manage Diversity: Readings, Cases & Activities' (1997)

<sup>6</sup> Peter Drucker 'Concept of The Corporation' (1993)

<sup>7</sup> Peter Drucker 'The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order' (1950)

<sup>8</sup> Rich Karlgaard, 'Peter Drucker on Leadership - Interview', 19 nov 2014

<sup>9</sup> Peter Drucker 'Technology, Management, and Society: Essays' (2011)