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‘Complementarity is the Power of Diversity’

Ladies and gentlemen,

I may be kind, I am ordinarily gentle, but in my line of business I am obliged to will terribly what I will at all.”

Not my words, but the words of one of my heroes. An influential, powerful leader of men, women and country.

Some would say an enlightened despot and patron of the arts. As I was born and raised in Russia, you may easily guess who I mean...

Yes, of course: Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia in the 18th century, the country’s longest-ruling female leader.

Why is she my hero? She is my hero because – when she was married of to Peter the Third – she had the talent and intelligence to combine her German ancestry with her new Russian life.

She had the charm and the wit to combine her – feminine – interest in books, arts and education with her – masculine – ability to rule a divided and divers country. She was a woman and an Empress.

She was a true Renaissance Woman who is still probably the ultimate example how diversity and talent create power and profit.

How feminine and masculine values complement each other.

What I, what we can learn from Catherine the Great is that diversity is not something that holds us back, but something that moves us forward.

So long as we recognise its power.
So long as we admit the strength of complementarity.

So long as we take an active role in making diversity work.

Diversity is too often seen as a container concept and is claimed by various social
groups to convey their own message.

Diversity, however, is much broader, is much more, than a simplified contradiction between us and them, male and female, black and white, old and young, Dutch and non-Dutch or even town and gown.

This use of the term diversity emphasizes what divide us, while diversity should be about making connections, about reinforcing each other’s talent, about recognizing and appreciating each other’s differences.

Differences like feminine and masculine values.

Despite the progress that the feminist movement has made for women’s cause, it has not been able to change the dominant system of masculine values in our society.

Up to a very recent date this ‘masculine’ system was the only professional model available.
It was the birth of the ‘business woman’, the graceless business suit, and...Margareth Thatcher.

But is that the model we want?
Is that the best we can do?
No, I know it is not.

Because work is not only about output.
Economy is not only about profit and prosperity.

It is about welfare and well-being.

...Time to update, or better, to expand Maslow’s pyramid.

I am sure most of you are familiar with his hierarchy of needs: it goes from physiological needs like water, food and warmth, to safety, belonging and love, esteem and ultimately: self-actualisation.

Needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up.

But this accumulation is not enough.

To make people happy, to create not only welfare but also well-being in our society, our financial institutions and universities, we must meet certain needs that are
fundamental to human beings.

In his book ‘Awaken the giant within’, life coach Anthony Robbins concludes that human beings are motivated by the desire to fulfil six core needs.

These core needs are not only – what I qualify as - masculine needs, like certainty, significance and growth, but also feminine needs like variety, connection and contribution.

Not one after another, but all at the same time.
We all know that masculine values and feminine values co-exist in men and women.

We all know rational and strong women.
We all know caring and sensitive men.
But the point is that we only recently have begun to value them in the same way.

To admit that both masculine and feminine values and needs are important. To admit that not uniformity but diversity is key to success.

Research commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment shows that organizations with cultural differences in the workplace often have a higher turnover.

They are more innovative and more responsive to changes in the market. They recruit more talent, have a better image and on top of that, have more satisfied and loyal employees.

In short: diversity is not only good for welfare, but also for well-being.

The challenge for every organisation is to find the optimum balance, the equilibrium between feminine and masculine needs and values.

If this were a Welfare Economics graph, we would call it the bliss point. The point where the equilibrium is optimal and efficient.

But how do we reach this bliss point?
Bringing different people together is not enough.

Recognizing and appreciating diversity is not enough.

It’s the next step that leads to growth: complementarity.

As singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco said: “I know there is strength in the differences
between us. I know there is comfort, where we overlap."

To accomplish that strength, we must step out of our comfort zone by embracing our differences, we must admit that we need each other to move forward.

If only we could learn this by heart, our organizations, our universities, our society will become more than the sum of its parts. Or... as your former rector Huib Pols said in his farewell speech: “To stay relevant we have to be diverse.”

And being diverse means stimulating complementarity: learning from each other’s strengths so that not only teams but also individuals reach the next level.

And that is where the City ... Society... meets science. As Kristel said: To walk the walk, we have to talk the talk.

For Erasmus University, that means: encourage complementarity on campus, in the lecture halls and the research facilities.

As stated on your website: “Talent-diversity is invaluable. The more diverse the views, cultures, knowledge and experience, the more innovative and creative education and research at Erasmus University will be.”

It is interesting that Erasmus University has more female than male employees and just as much female as male graduates, but only 17 percent of your professors are female. Just like most of the Dutch universities.

It’s just as bad in the financial sector where I work. There, only 4% of CEO’s and 13% of the top management is female.

You can imagine how proud it made me when my CEO appointed two women in the board of ABN-AMRO.

In one night we went from zero to 25% female top managers. Still not enough, but an important step in the right direction.

Especially because research shows, that female managers are icebreakers on the way to more diversity and complementarity.

But the question is: Why is it that with every step forward on the career ladder, the percentage of women takes a step backward?

Interesting research question. What do you think?
And that is where universities, where Erasmus University can do its bit for diversity.

Not only by encouraging a diversity and complementarity on campus, but also by doing scientific research to answer essential questions, to guide theory towards practice. Of course in close cooperation with the business community and social organizations.

I invite you to use your science to put diversity into practice. To use your science to answer relevant questions.

Questions like: If there is diversity within an organization, how do we maintain this diversity?

We see too often that people leave or are swallowed by the existing – masculine - culture within a company. How do we ensure that diversity in the culture of an organization is anchored?

And the question that complements the former: How do we stimulate complementarity?, how do we balance feminine and masculine characteristics?, how do we incorporate other views from different backgrounds?

Or a question in an even broader perspective: How do we integrate diversity into the result thinking of many organizations?

The business community and even government are not known for their long term perspective, but diversity is not something for one budget, for one financial year.

...We need those answers.

We need to know the power of diversity.

We need to know the strength of complementarity.

We need to know how we can take an active role in making diversity work.

Catherine the Great once said "I am one of those people who like the why of things."

I hope you are like me: one of those people who want to go beyond the why to the what and the how. Because knowing Why things happen is not enough. To inspire change we need to know What to do, How to change, How to succeed.

And I am convinced this can only happen if we are not afraid to be ourselves. To show our true colours.
Not like the picture of this cat.

All her colour, all her diversity is constricted by a black border, ... and she has no mouth to express herself. For me this cat is special, symbolic.

Not only because my daughter painted her when she just moved to the Netherlands and could not speak Dutch, but because this cat is how I understand diversity.

Colourful, full of energy and possibilities, bursting to express itself and reach its full potential.

But in need of a responsible society, where diversity is seen as strength. Imagine,... ...using the unique possibilities of Erasmus University to create this responsible society.

As Catherine the Great said: "It is better to inspire a reform, than to enforce it."

I call on you, I challenge you to inspire all-of-us!

Thank you!