Personal Diversity Management: 
A Praxis Approach to Diversity and Decision-Making

Larry G. Lee, E.D.D.

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**Personal Diversity Management: A Praxis Approach to Diversity and Decision-Making**

**LARRY G. LEE, E.D.D.**

**INTRODUCTION**

One question to rule them all: “What does success demand of you?”

For organizational coaches and their clients, success requires what I call “personal diversity management.” Diversity is difficult to define. Some only use the term diversity as it is defined by law. Some separate diversity into easily noticed “surface-level” (ethnicity, gender) or “deep-level” (personality, time urgency) categories. (Mohammed and Angell, 2004) Yet other researchers parse diversity into age, education, social category, values, and informational (John, Northcraft, and Neale, 1999), national, or cultural segments. (Muir, 2001)

The dimensions of diversity are also diverse. Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede (2005) identify five key dimensions of cultural diversity: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long vs. short-term orientation. In addition, they have characterized over seventy nations in each of these dimensions. Extending beyond these national dimensions, Nancy Adler and Barbara Whiteman (1992) introduce the cultural level. Adler advocates making managers trans-nationally competent in three areas: scope, representation, and process. Scope deals with who is included geographically in the decision processes, representation refers to the inclusion of individuals who represent diverse cultures in the decision-making, and process deals with maximizing various cultural values and insights into the decision processes.

The term will use for the categories above is macro-diversity. Interventions at the macro-diversity level are typically system-wide programs and processes. Managing macro-diversity at the company level is, for the most part, an indirect and impersonal system for dealing with equity and access issues across a diverse population. By contrast, the term micro-diversity will refer to dealing with diversity in a more intimate, interpersonal relationship context. Micro-diversity is based on personal contact, which can be direct face-to-face interactions or indirect electronic interactions. At the macro-diversity level, people want to see their contributions influence the organizations to which they belong. Employees want a level playing field. They want evidence that they are contributing to something greater than they could achieve alone. At the micro-diversity level, employees want meaningful relationships...
and dignity. In everything, they want synergy. They want to add their contributions to the contributions of others in order to multiply their combined effectiveness beyond mere addition.

In this article, I advocate for personal, micro-diversity management as a precursor to, and in tandem with, macro-diversity management. Specifically, I believe that diversity coaching should focus first on personal decision-making in micro-diverse contexts in order to establish personal credibility required for macro-diversity leadership. Coaches are in a unique position to walk with clients as clients go through their own micro-diversity maze. Coaching can also help clients discover which steps are appropriate to take next and when to take them.

**ABOUT COACHING IN A DIVERSE CONTEXT**

For the purpose of clarity, let me start with my personal definition of coaching in a diverse context. The purpose of coaching is to help clients heighten their awareness, deepen their understanding, forward their momentum and capture their moments of opportunity. The goal of coaching is long-term client success within their diverse environment. The fourfold means of coaching include increasing the client's awareness, understanding, behavioral skills and/or timing skills. Expanding upon these four means, when clients grow they are better able to:

- make increasingly acute observations about differences that matter,
- understand their own decision-making tendencies and the impact they create,
- assess the inclusion/exclusion attributes of different decision-making processes,
- understand how other cultures, organizations or domains solve similar issues in diverse ways and use diverse data elements,
- interpret behaviors from diverse perspectives and use this knowledge to self-manage personal behaviors,
- act with appropriateness – even when evaluated from multiple perspectives,
- develop proficiency in current skills or accelerate rate of acquiring new skills that expand the client's behavioral range of effectiveness, and
- recognize opportunities and make good use of them.

Over the last 20 years of coaching, I have used these four means of coaching to create all of my coaching interventions. When clients are engaged in means analysis and decision-making, I disengage from giving advice to clients (Argyris, 2000) This has been an important step in making actionable and effective coaching interventions. Why? Because advice giving eventually creates a recognizable pattern that ends in futility. By contrast, clients grow in capability and capacity when coaches provide awareness, insight, options and opinions about the potential impact of various choices. For example, in my early coaching years, a client would tell me about her situation and that she found herself perplexed by conditions “A” and “B” and “C.” In my wisdom, I would immediately announce that the solution to her situation was

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Coaching for personal diversity effectiveness differs from developing a diversity program. Diversity programs are important, but they are not the first consideration.
2003) They comprise the DNA of the organization. Changing individual executitives in the core group changes the group and changing the group changes the organization. It works from the inside out. It requires personal, prudent courage to challenge existing practices. Coaches are instrumental in assisting clients to identify their own courageous direction and also in creating prudent pathways to get there. In terms of diversity, it means helping your clients address diverse issues or diverse communities with diverse-wise action steps.

A DECISION-MAKING APPROACH TO COACHING FOR DIVERSITY

Diversity "management" demands an executive’s time at a point when they are trying to shave precious minutes out of their day to concentrate on the “real” issues. Since time is an inelastic resource, everything that consumes time must be aggressively managed. One reason to explore a decision-making approach to coaching for diversity is because it fits into every moment-by-moment decision. Once the personal integration takes hold, everything else follows.

The next few paragraphs are not about baseball, but about a man who played it. Why would I use an American sport illustration with an international audience and a topic of diversity? First, I don't think diversity is about erasing or minimizing personal experiences. Second, diversity is not about making everything so blended and bland that it becomes mush. Distinctions are the basis of dialogue and discovery. Think for a moment about how Albert Einstein noted certain anomalies in his study of Newtonian physics and how these distinctions birthed the theory of relativity. Years later, quantum physics joined the parade because it explained some of the anomalies that could not be explained by previous theories. We need precise analysis and diverse diversity, to help us explore what is true, lasting and valuable. Third, I use this illustration because from it I learned principles that have been used successfully across diverse perspectives and populations.

Let me introduce you to Ted Williams. Many consider Ted Williams to have been the best baseball hitter of all time. As my son and I studied Williams 25 years ago, we discovered he had great eyesight. In fact, Williams could see at 20 feet what others could not see past ten feet. In one account, Williams told his teammates that he could “see his bat hitting the ball.” The idea of seeing the “hit” of ball and bat seemed impossible. After all, the fastest pitches traveled over 95 miles per hour (154 kilometers per hour). Nobody believed Williams. He proved it by putting black pine tar, a substance like shoe polish, on his bat. After blackening his bat, Williams hit the next pitch and while the ball was being brought back, he explained exactly where the black spot would be on the ball. He was right.

Excellent vision is not enough to be great. Williams also had to have the relevant dynamics of ball, bat and body. He had to understand himself as well as the actions and interactions of others. He had to predict what was likely to happen next.

Williams was unique in his sensing, evaluating and physical abilities. Yet these three were insufficient without one additional ingredient. Williams also had to have excellent vision to hit the ball exactly where he saw it. In one account, Williams told his teammates that he could “see his bat hitting the ball.” The idea of seeing the “hit” of ball and bat seemed impossible. After all, the fastest pitches traveled over 95 miles per hour (154 kilometers per hour). Nobody believed Williams. He proved it by putting black pine tar, a substance like shoe polish, on his bat. After blackening his bat, Williams hit the next pitch and while the ball was being brought back, he explained exactly where the black spot would be on the ball. He was right.

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time his actions appropriately. He couldn’t get hits swinging too early or too late. He had to hit the ball when it was in just the right place. In fact, in order to hit at that level, he had to go through his “sensation, evaluation and action” sequence in less than half a second. Analyzing these four means (Sensing, Evaluating, Acting and Timing, or SEAT) to understand and improve effectiveness is not limited to hitting baseballs.

**SEAT ANALYSIS**

Although it’s on a different playing field, executives go through the same sequence almost every moment of the day. Due to the pace of business, executive skills are honed to make almost immediate Stimulus-Response reactions. And that is, in large part, the micro-diversity problem. Incorporating “diverse wisdom” requires decoupling these S-R dynamics and creating the potential for new interpretations to existing stimuli and more inclusive reactions. It may also require extending the dash from S-R to S------R, so that more inclusive, encouraging, and effective behaviors can replace the existing automated responses. Invariably, the SEAT analysis contributes to making executives more aware and more effective. And it works in seemingly monolithic as well as obviously diverse situations.

Using SEAT as the model, Ted could have been coached to be more aware of his special contribution and how other professionals either understood or misunderstood him. The coach could have added other dimensions of Ted’s awareness (S) in order to maximize Ted’s visual giftedness. The coach could have helped Williams see how his behaviors impacted team performance or explained the value of integrating both physical and interpersonal perceptions. By the way, some coaching suggestions would not have made Ted a better individual player; but, potentially, they could have made his team more effective. Also, the coach could have highlighted the additional decisions required of giftedness. For example, Williams could have chosen to learn (E) how “normal” people experience hitting a baseball. He could have learned how to encourage those who did not share his giftedness or chosen to adjust his interpersonal behaviors (A) so that he was not seen as arrogant. He could have learned to intentionally engage in discerning when (T) and how his talents contributed most to the team.

**Sensing**

In my experience, most highly talented individuals are highly attuned to the realities corresponding to their area of giftedness. While it does occur, it is truly rare to encounter a gifted and deaf musician like Ludwig van Beethoven. Few have Beethoven’s ability to rely on their memory of sound to write their music. Typically, “real time” sensing giftedness creates the dynamics that are important to your client and your coaching process. I’m sure that in William’s case, it took him awhile to discover that his visual acuity was not common to others. I’m confident that neither of his parents said, “Ted, when you talk to others about what you see, you are going to be misunderstood. In fact, only one person in about one hundred thousand people has your visual acuity. You will never know what it is to see ‘normally,’ and it will never be normal for others to see what you never miss.” Think about how helpful this conversation would have been to Williams. Think about how useful this can be to your client.

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There are many other implications to Sensing giftedness. I have used the following questions to learn about my awareness limits as a coach and to help clients expand their awareness potential.

- What’s on my “radar screen”?
- What level of detail do I capture?
- What do I “pay attention to” and why?
- What do others “pay attention to” that I dismiss?
- What can I do to create a more inclusive “reality”?
- Do I pressure others to adopt my version of reality?
- Who typically sees issues first, and in what domains?
- In which domains do I see more, or less, detail than my associates?
- How can I extend the reach of my radar to include other perspectives?
- In which domains do I read at “20/10” or “20/20/20” on the “Eye Chart”?
- Do I make others understand my reality without exploring their reality?
- To what degree do I believe my sample of “reality” is, in fact, total “reality”?
- How can I make effective the associates with the best vision in each domain?

Evaluation

Once the data are gathered, they have to be processed. It takes an extremely robust logic engine to overcome data that are incomplete, improperly coded or inaccurate. According to Drucker (1967), the first issue is to determine if the problem is systematic or sporadic. Why? Because systematic problems require systematic solutions. The goal is to create robust decision engines that are able to ingest high levels of fluctuation and produce low variation, high quality products. Establishing a way to determine decision quality is essential in diversity engagement. As an individual, and an organization, one needs to know if the results of decisions systematically and repeatedly alienate certain groups or prevent certain outcomes. This needs to be evaluated within the macro- and micro-diversity environments. Why would this be true? It is true because whenever macro- and micro-solutions are not aligned, the macro-level effort is seen as another way to manipulate the system and its people.

In my opinion, Dr. Thomas Kochman, founder of Kochman Mavrelis Associates, Inc. (KMA), is most perceptive in his understanding and articulation of diversity as an intention versus diversity as an outcome. Diversity as an intention creates fairness by creating equal opportunities. Diversity of outcomes focuses on equal results. Let me explain. A few years ago I was a member of a regional diversity council in a large corporation. Like every corporation of size, it was continually defending itself against allegations of abuse and discrimination. In many cases, it successfully defended itself, but it was losing some significant cases as well. At this time, the company had just offered to pay out millions in settlement to a group of professional women rather than continue the battle and force a legal decision. At the same time, I was made aware of a situation within one functional area of the organization that was selecting first level supervisors. The good news was that the organization that was selecting first level supervisors. The good news was

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that almost half of the candidates for the 70 openings were qualified women with work histories equivalent to the men. And, in this context, a 50 percent gender mix defined “equal” opportunity. From this perspective, the company was in good shape. However, only two women were offered management positions.

The statistical evaluation of the decisions made it clear: women had equal opportunity to get into the selection pool, but not into the position. It is particularly interesting that in this case, systematic failure cannot be seen by the individual hiring managers. The sensing mechanism fails the organization at the macro-level. This type of problem can only be seen and understood at the macro-level. It can only be seen from an oversight position. I’m certain that each of the 68 managers could justify their male selections. The question is, “Does the executive team pay attention to the aggregate results of their selection and decision-making processes?” The diverse effective executive must integrate both macro- and micro-diversity awareness to be effective at the organizational level.

In another context, one of my associates once asked me to “parachute in” and assist him in an executive leadership team offsite meeting. This program leadership team controlled about $500M worth of business and they were already millions of dollars over budget. The team was comprised of 24 executives and they had hired an executive to help them control program cost just a few days before the offsite. Since my associate was certified in a particular instrument, he had required that everyone in this team take The Birkman Method® assessment. My role was to review the team’s “practical” diversity using the assessment. The overview report delineates professionals into four primary roles. For purposes of clarity, I’ll give each one a unique color.

- **Red individuals** - produce goods and services through physical action and honed skills.
- **Green individuals** - introduce innovations to the marketplace and sell these innovations in the marketplace.
- **Blue individuals** - envision significant innovations that change markets or improve market share.
- **Yellow individuals** - assure margins and quality through financial and process expertise, and codification.

Picture a two-by-two grid with one of these color groups in each of the four quadrants. Imagine that the active reds had 12 people, the innovative blues had seven people, the assertive greens had four individuals and the efficient yellow group had the remaining individual, the new executive. Even a preliminary visual review made it clear that the reds were the voting block. They were the core group. We reviewed the typical dynamics of each color group. Each group verified that the descriptions about themselves, and the interactions among colors, were true and accurate. While there were many important discussion topics that day, none was more important than discussing the fact that the team had just hired the “right” cost control manager. She was well suited to her task and the only yellow manager.

The first part of the review exposed the fact that the red core group “ran over” their blue, green and yellow peers. Reds did not have to wait for permission to speak or act. Reds demonstrated all the credentials attributed to privilege. And, they didn’t see it. They assumed it was normal, right and good. They were the
core group. The danger for this program was whether or not the red core group would permit the cost control manager to impact their decisions. The program would suffer if the 23 other managers did not permit this new, diverse, yellow executive a chance to influence the program's processes, procedures and decisions. If the yellow executive became a token manager, then the point of hiring her would be lost.

If we sit in her seat for a moment, we would be asking, "What will it be like if I get overwhelmed 100 percent of the time?" The question the leadership team needs to ask is, "How long will it take to completely extinguish the contribution we envisioned when the new executive was hired?" This is the question of diversity. How can any organization justify personnel "costs without contribution"? Talent is wasted if the core group consistently ignores or overrules non-core group perspectives.

At the personal level, executives must evaluate all their direct relationships with core and non-core associates. The first step should be an evaluation of who gets access to the executive and who gets to influence outcomes. Managing diversity at this micro-level requires that executives (leaders) personally challenge the status quo, force new perspectives into the mix and make sure that diverse contributions are integrated into organizational results.

**AN ADDITIONAL LEVEL OF MODELING**

It is not my purpose to review other models in detail, rather I wish to briefly depict the evolution of organizational alignment models at the macro-level and identify decision points that can be more inclusive at the micro-level. Many executives and organizations use RAA terminology to define who does what and to whom they do it. RAA stands for who is Responsible for tasks, who is Accountable for overall success and who has decision-making Authority. Operationally, RAA has clarified some organizational issues, but not all. Another model, RACI, (Bolman and Deal, 1991) was developed because it dealt with more issues than the RAA model. RACI, expanded, means: who is Responsible, who is Accountable, who is Consulted and who is Informed. Some professionals re-order RACI to ARCI, denoting that whoever is ultimately accountable and has final decision rights should be listed first. In my experience, when we look at issues and interventions in the light of diverse perspectives, we need to add to the ARCI model by specifically identifying who has the ability to "support" or negate initiatives. The resulting acronym for this model is ARSCI. Managing diversity at this micro-level requires that executives (leaders) personally challenge the status quo, force new perspectives into the mix and make sure that diverse contributions are integrated into organizational results.

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*The IJCO Issue 4 2006 issue contains a related article titled 'Managing Diversity: An Additional Level of Modeling' by Dr. Robert M. Brouthers.*

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This is the question of diversity. How can any organization justify personnel "costs without contribution"? Talent is wasted if the core group consistently ignores or overrules non-core group perspectives.
Executives typically have highly professional and polished skills. That is part of the personal and organizational levels. The ARSCI model assists the executive in sorting out roles and determining how to engage diverse perspectives. Options can range from assigning a person who is much different from the client to helping the client enlist diverse support or identifying who should be informed before they raise objections. For example, one of my toughest lessons in this arena was when I was selecting candidates into an executive coaching program for a large corporation. Success demanded that I select coaches based on their ethics, integrity, and skills. It also demanded that I select some individuals who had styles, perspectives, and education that differed greatly from those with which I was familiar, those I appreciated, and those I wanted to use. I discovered that it took personal courage to select diverse candidates whom the core culture was not yet ready to embrace. Often the executive core group also experiences this pressure. Typically, their incentive packages pressure them to comply with those existing organizational norms that have not yet been formally articulated by the company.

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The following questions may provide insight into learning new ways to search, evaluate, and interpret data.

- What “wake” is being created by the way we make decisions?
- How closely do I resemble “Not always right, but never in doubt”?
- Do I believe my giflerness in one area extends to all facets of my life?
- Is there any group or perspective that is consistently being overlooked?
- How willing am I to set my own agenda and try somebody else’s idea?
- Who around me keeps suggesting approaches that I think could not work?
- What problems do I solve well and which problems are chronically recurrent?
- When do I experience “silent resistance” that eventually erodes effectiveness?
- How could I seek out new or different mental models or problem-solving techniques?
- How well does my decision-making approach include diverse perspectives and groups?

Just as sensing data informs the mind and gives it something to consider, the evaluation process informs the senses of what is important. In scientific environments, scientists seek to test, understand, predict, and explain the outliers, in order to more completely describe the complexity of the world. In practical applications, it is common for professionals to eliminate the outlying information because it simplifies the decision matrix. Executives need to be in the management science business in all domains, and in particular, diversity. Executives are responsible for creating increasingly synergistic and inclusive innovations at both the personal and organizational levels.

Action

Executives typically have highly professional and polished skills. That is part of the personal and organizational levels. Within the diversity setting, “informed” means informing individuals or organizations before strategic events are set in motion, not after results are completed. It is especially important to inform those entities who cannot help you with your accomplishment, but who can obstruct or negate its objective. In particular, the practical objective of informing is to prevent embarrassment and invite good will. It expands the ring of inclusion.

The following questions may provide insight into learning new ways to search, evaluate, and interpret data.

- What “wake” is being created by the way we make decisions?
- How closely do I resemble “Not always right, but never in doubt”?
- Do I believe my giflerness in one area extends to all facets of my life?
- Is there any group or perspective that is consistently being overlooked?
- How willing am I to set my own agenda and try somebody else’s idea?
- Who around me keeps suggesting approaches that I think could not work?
- What problems do I solve well and which problems are chronically recurrent?
- When do I experience “silent resistance” that eventually erodes effectiveness?
- How could I seek out new or different mental models or problem-solving techniques?
- How well does my decision-making approach include diverse perspectives and groups?

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of what made them acceptable to the executive selection committee. Since executive coaches often work in this arena, the balance of this section will focus on behavioral assumptions, perceptions and interpretations. Various researchers espouse the notion that when executive behaviors are "less-than-effective" they are often the product of either under- or over-use of their strengths. (Birkman, 1995; Lombardo and Eichinger, 2004) The yardstick one deploys is significant when evaluating behaviors, particularly when behavioral descriptions are often value laden. For example, one observer might watch a video tape of an executive and describe the executive as "bull-headed and unwilling to listen." Another observer might describe those same behaviors as "persistent and dedicated." The problem is that observer descriptions tell you a lot about the two observers and very little about the behaviors of the client.

Years ago, I remember two fathers watching their sons play baseball one morning. One was the father of the pitcher and the other the hitter. When the umpire called the pitch a "strike," the pitcher's father was delighted at the umpire's skill. In opposite fashion, the hitter's dad thought it was a "ball" and that the umpire needed to wear eyeglasses. Of course, the interaction was reversed for a pitch that the umpire called a "ball." The real path of the baseball was irrelevant. What these fathers wanted overruled objectivity. This is also one of the great downfalls of 3600 assessments. It is rare indeed that a rater identifies exact behaviors, in their context, and makes a behavioral suggestion that is more universally understood and appreciated. It is the role of professional executive coaches to provide diversely sensitive and diversely insightful suggestions in the behavioral arena. At a minimum, the client can be given assignments to engage diverse populations and to explore which behaviors engage that group, and why, and which behaviors enrage that group, and why. Ultimately, the executive needs to become aware of how his or her behaviors are interpreted and what, if anything, can be done to improve them. Eventually, executives learn which behaviors create the most positive energy across their diverse populations and which ones produce drag. The savvy executive never stops learning the micro-diversity lessons of the day.

The following items may provide insight into identifying the occasions when skill attainment or enhancement is worthwhile to explore:

- when "surprises" occur regularly,
- when absenteeism becomes noticeable,
- when energized, messy discussions cease,
- when questions are invited and none are voiced,
- when the executive's behavior creates unanticipated reactions, and
- when expectations are not met and no one seems accountable.

Skills tend to be the easiest of the four areas to gain proficiency. Programs and educational opportunities abound. The items above are intended to raise awareness about the impact behaviors create in observers.

**Timing**

For everything there is a season. At the task level, timing is about going through the "windows of opportunity" when they are open. It is getting on the dock, and on board, before the ship sets sail. There is another aspect of timing that
Wisdom is learning how to stay aware, understanding the needs of diverse situations, keeping skills honed and mixing these ingredients together when they need to be used. Improving a sense of timing might include:

- Asking individuals in the micro-climate when things ought to be done for best effect,
- Engaging the macro-diverse community and asking for their timing perspectives,
- Developing a macro-diverse calendar of events in order to make commitments fit the population and the business,
- Directly asking individuals when they want “direct feedback” or “praise.”

Timing is about finesse in some situations and driving hard in others. While the key meaning is appropriateness, what may be appropriate in one situation is not in another. The goal of timing is effectiveness and using the least amount of force to accomplish the goals. One situation may call for an executive to stand up in a meeting and stop verbal abuse. This “real time” intervention is appropriate. When lesser infractions occur, it is often acceptable to wait for a more appropriate time to address them properly. The critical point is: if executives let anyone diminish the person who differs from the core group, these micro-diversity infractions will diminish the entire macro-diversity effort over time.

SUMMARY

In summary, effective macro-diversity management requires micro-diversity competence. Growing these competencies requires that executives learn new levels of awareness, new evaluative and behavioral skills, and discernment into when it is best to act. In general, it requires a personal commitment to growth and the courage to initiate more inclusive behaviors. Specifically, the question remains: “What does success demand of you?”

should also be noted: it is timing for appropriateness. At the personal level, appropriateness is the key measure. Regardless of merit, when direct, negative feedback is given publicly, it is often noted as socially inapproriate. But that is not universally the case. At the macro-diversity level, KMA15 founder Dr. Tom Kochman describes some cultures as “Trust before Truth” and others as “Truth before Trust.” At the personal level, that may mean that some individuals prefer to “hammer out” differences in public prior to working on mutual objectives in public. At the same time, others want to “work up to” the difficult issues. This bipolar tension occurs many times a day in various dimensions. Some individuals believe they know when the executive should go left, while others advocate for taking the next right turn. Again, it’s about choices and weighing these choices, in real time, so that diverse participants are more likely to stay engaged.

The executive, at micro-diverse moments, needs to learn when to grow the capacity of the team by addressing the real diversity issues at the moment, and when to push toward accomplishment. The art form is learning how to actively, intentionally and consistently do both. Wisdom is learning how to stay aware, understanding the needs of diverse situations, keeping skills honed and mixing these ingredients together when they need to be used. Improving a sense of timing might include:

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In 2006, Larry joined Birkman International, Inc. as their Senior Director of Research and Development. Prior to that role, Larry was the Practice Leader for Instrument Analysis (IA) for The Boeing Company. As the IA leader, he was responsible for selecting which personality assessments were fit for company use and also contributed to the internal assessment processes within the company. Larry has almost twenty years of experience in executive coaching and developing executive coaches.

REFERENCES


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