In many regions of the world a shortage of skilled workers looms. Whether induced by retiring baby boomers, changing requisite skills, emerging markets, or failing educational systems, this burgeoning demand means that women and other underrepresented groups comprise larger portions of new workforce entrants as well as candidates for promotion. At the same time, globalization has reached nearly every sector of developed markets placing coworkers in the next cubicle or on another continent.

As this increased diversity manifests, many organizations are struggling to take advantage of the accompanying new range of perspectives, experiences, and knowledge. In some cases in fact, they are hampered by their lack of inclusion, which damages productivity, hurts retention, and curtails employee engagement.

These largely self-inflicted organizational wounds are generally caused by some form of bias, pro or con, conscious or unconscious. In some cases it’s almost invisible, in others it is an accepted practice for hiring, developing, or advancing individuals. In order to create the inclusive work environments that increasingly diverse workforces require, leaders need a way to identify all forms of bias and articulate how to eliminate them to frontline managers and employees in a constructive and enduring way.

Global Novations, a Korn/Ferry company, developed a comprehensive framework to deal with bias that we call the Vectors™ Theory. In physics, a vector is a force with both magnitude and direction—for instance,
a headwind that impedes a runner’s performance. Metaphorically speaking, headwinds are the forces that can work against an individual, pushing him or her off track. The level of harm caused by headwinds varies by the degree to which that person differs from the organizational norm (in terms of age, sex, race, culture, etc.). The cost is not just to the individual, but also to the entire organization; the energy sapped by headwinds should instead be flowing into productivity, engagement, innovation, and exceeding customers’ expectations.

Based on employee engagement surveys, company culture audits, focus groups, exit interviews, and other client engagements, our consultants have identified hundreds of headwinds. To facilitate recognition and resolution, we placed them into seven categories of Vectors: Outright Bias, Assumptions and Stereotypes, Organizational Traditions, Reference Group Information and Emotional Support, Cultural Norms, Beliefs About Laws and Diversity Programs and Internal Debate.

The Vectors Theory gives organizations a framework for attacking specific barriers to diversity and inclusion by:

- Enabling employees to discuss the headwinds without describing them as “isms” (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.), thus avoiding putting managers on the defensive.
- Providing managers with a guide to identify, discuss, and eliminate such headwinds without putting the organization at legal risk.
- Distinguishing between performance issues and lack of success caused by headwinds impeding one’s ability to perform.
- Providing managers with a guide to identify, discuss, and problem solve obstacles to engagement with each employee.
- In a 2009 meta-analysis of studies across 152 organizations, Gallup linked employee engagement to higher profitability and customer engagement, and lower absenteeism and turnover.

To follow are three diversity-related case studies, a discussion of the Vector headwinds involved, and explanations of how the Vectors Theory would be applied. Although one might assume that such challenges are obvious and easy to fix, over and over again in our work with organizations we find such situations go unaddressed, if not completely unnoticed. Our work with client companies has revealed that:

- Managers have numerous, competing priorities and often miss obvious signals from disengaged employees.
The complexity of global operations impedes organizations’ ability to execute highly effective talent management strategies.

Some of the biases that cause headwinds are accepted, unofficial practices and do not violate the legal “cans” and “can’ts” taught to managers.

The headwinds are often invisible to those who resemble the organizational norm.

The situations below capture some of the difficulties, conflicting perspectives and thought processes that we routinely come across in organizations and that can be addressed with Vector strategies.

Case 1: Reference group information and emotional support

**Situation:** Liz has been in the marketing function for almost six years. Currently a marketing manager, she relocated from the Manchester office to London in part to get the development and exposure necessary to move up in the organization. Although things started out smoothly, Liz began to have concerns about her ability to contribute meaningfully to her team as well as her chances for advancement and is wondering whether she should look elsewhere for another job.

Liz decided to analyze what exactly was happening so that she could discuss it with her manager, Raj. She worried that what she had to tell him would make him defensive. Liz made a list of her concerns so that she would stay on point:

- The men who reported to Liz were comfortable with Raj (and he with them) and consequently would sometimes (intentionally?) circumvent Liz and get Raj’s okay to move forward on deliverables.
- Liz often worked at home in the evenings after dinner and her kids’ homework, but saw how her colleagues looked at her as she was leaving. Nor was it unusual to hear lighthearted comments about “banker’s hours.”
- In meetings it wasn’t the best idea that always won; it was often the idea that was argued the most or loudest.
- Raj did not give Liz his undivided attention during her presentations the way he did others and her colleagues were starting to mirror his behavior.
- Most importantly, though it was barely perceptible, Liz felt that the men in the group were connected in a way that was very subtle. They didn’t share information, sometimes even to the team’s detriment. It seemed that decisions were made before meetings even took place and the same people were always in agreement. Maybe the after work socializing on the way home had created a team within the team, including Raj?
**Discussion:** Hearing this situation from Liz’s perspective, the headwinds she faces may appear obvious, but if they are, why is Raj — a talented, successful leader — not seeing them, in some ways even condoning them? Because the power of Reference Groups can be subtle but strong.

Reference Groups create headwinds, barriers to success when one has little in common with decision makers or other key coworkers. One is often left out of the informal flow of information and support readily given to others. Over time this makes excluded individuals appear less capable, hurting their productivity and reducing their engagement. In fact, the central problem is that they aren’t receiving the informal mentoring and sponsorship that people who “fit” get throughout their careers.

**Applying a Vectors Strategy:** Talent coaching for Raj based on Vectors would start with an exploration of his perceptions. Does he know that the microinequities he is displaying toward Liz may be eroding her credibility as a manager? Why does he allow her direct reports to circumvent her? Is it familiarity, an inability to be forthright and send them to Liz, micromanagement, or simply the need to be needed? Regardless of the cause, Raj is undermining Liz’s authority and creating more headwinds for her.

Reference Groups hold a distinct advantage over even the best workplace networker. Networking is a subordinate-to-superior activity, often limited in scope and information sharing, whereas in Reference Groups, information and support flow from senior leaders down to the people they are comfortable with and readily trust. Once Raj has a greater awareness of how his values and beliefs manifest as behaviors, he can begin to negate the headwinds he has created for Liz. A refined strategy, developed with input from Liz, would hold them both accountable for specific actions with timelines and quantifiable goals.

**Case 2: Beliefs about laws and diversity programs**

**Situation:** Jeff has been a Finance Manager for almost three years. A Stanford grad in his mid-thirties, Jeff is doing very well and generally feels that he has life “by the horns.” He’s seen as a relationship builder and knows that promotion depends not just on skill and ability, but also getting others to buy into his ideas. Although he isn’t the most tenured member of his team, he is held in high regard and resembles the department leaders in terms of thinking and communication styles, background and values.

A 2011 Catalyst report “Sponsoring Women to Success” identified a subtle, crucial difference between male and female executives: Men had senior executives who advocated for their advancement, as opposed to women who were merely mentored.
According to Catalyst, in 2012 women comprised only 14.3 percent of CEOs and 16.6 percent of corporate board directors in the Fortune 500.

Ever the strategic thinker, Jeff rigorously sizes up Brad and Rick, his competition, and concludes that barring catastrophe, he’ll be first in line for promotion to director. Jeff gives little thought to his performance evaluation as he has been told by his manager on more than one occasion that he is doing well.

A month later it is announced that Ruth has been promoted to director. Jeff and many of the people around him are shocked. Jeff had no idea that Ruth wanted the job, much less was a viable candidate. Everything’s moving at breakneck speed so Jeff’s manager Bruce hasn’t discussed the promotion with him. Rumor has it that Finance is trying to improve the “numbers” and Ruth was the best choice available. Jeff never bought into the reverse-discrimination stuff, but now he’s starting to wonder. He’s determined to get time on Bruce’s calendar soon to find out why he wasn’t promoted.

**Discussion:** The notion that promotions are completely based on merit is a fallacy. And yet most organizations fail to acknowledge, let alone communicate, this simple fact. Ruth could have been promoted for many reasons. Perhaps someone else needed experience in Ruth’s present role as a stretch assignment so Ruth had to be moved and she was deemed promotable; maybe the organization wanted Ruth to play a key role elsewhere and six months in the director’s position would provide her with necessary training; or possibly Ruth would bring a desired perspective, approach or background that had been missing at that level. Any or all of the above could be true and assuming that Ruth is a strong performer, the decision is a solid one. Still, such determinations generally lack transparency, leading to harmful conjecture. This is further exacerbated in some regions of the world by the public and political debates about the fairness and effectiveness of antidiscrimination laws and diversity-promoting initiatives.

Beliefs about the laws and diversity programs create headwinds when people view themselves as unfairly losing out on opportunities. Their productivity or engagement may decline if they become convinced that the traditional paths to success are no longer available. Compounding that damage, such beliefs can cause them to treat those perceived to be program beneficiaries in ways that are detrimental to those people’s careers—for instance by withholding crucial feedback, applying different standards their work, or labeling them “diversity promotions.”
Applying a Vectors Strategy: The Vectors framework would advise that organizations articulate—clearly and frequently—the positive effect that a diverse and inclusive workforce at all levels has on desired business outcomes. These connections should be quantifiable, short, and long term. Just as business leaders lay out the skills and competencies required for promotion, they must also convey the fluidity of decisions made about development and advancement. Having such talent management practices in place would put Jeff’s boss Bruce on more solid footing.

Still, all of the above are intellectual responses to what are often emotional reactions. Bruce, having been party to the discussions that went into promoting Ruth, may fail to see why anyone would question the move’s fairness or the headwinds that it might generate.

In fact, maybe Bruce doesn’t believe the decision was just, or thinks the organization overvalues diversity and inclusion at the expense of its traditions and standards. This possibility also underscores why talent management cannot be done in a vacuum, coaching one manager at a time. Rather all leaders should have quantifiable talent management metrics (such as ones for employee engagement), as part of their own performance evaluation. That’s the foundation Bruce needs as he gives due thought to the headwinds he must manage to enable both Jeff and Ruth to succeed in the months and years to come.

Case 3: Cultural norms

Situation: With auto production booming in Mexico, Peter Vogel’s company needed to double the output of its electronic parts plant in Naucalpan. Since its start ten years ago, the factory had been run very successfully by Mexican executives but with this increased demand, Peter was sent from headquarters in Düsseldorf to take charge. He’d been a success as the assistant general manager of the company’s facility in Essen and he knew that being victorious in Naucalpan would pave the way for him to become a GM of a larger plant back home in Germany.

On his first day in Naucalpan, Peter was greeted at the facility by Alex, the assistant general manager who himself had aspirations to become the plant’s GM. Once everyone on the staff was settled (twenty minutes later than the scheduled time), Peter started the meeting: “Good afternoon, I am Vogel, the new plant manager. My goal is to smoothly double our output in six months while reaching a higher level of quality and a lower unit cost.
I know that I will have your full cooperation as your numbers to date have been impressive. I look forward to working with you. I’m sure I’ll be spending more time with each of you so for now please just share your name and responsibility.” Upon completion of the last introduction, Peter thanked everyone and went to his office to begin reviewing the latest production reports with Alex.

Three months later and things were not going as Peter had planned. Output was up, but leveled off far short of his projections. Quality had improved, but not so much as to warrant attention from anyone in Düsseldorf. Peter wondered whether his staff was up to the task at hand. Meetings often started behind schedule because key personnel were late. It was hard to get everyone engaged in critical thinking and discussion. People would agree to something, but then not complete the task. Peter saw a lot of this behavior in Alex too. He began to minimize Alex’s role in meetings, especially those dedicated to the six-month ramp-up.

**Discussion:** Hastened by time to market, increasing competition, fluctuating commodity prices, etc., organizations rush to achieve their goals without giving full consideration to potential traps along the way, like an expat confronting Cultural Norms. Cultural Norms create headwinds when the way one behaves is contrary to the existing culture and is viewed as a negative or “less than” instead of simply “different from.”

But just because you perceive the gap doesn’t mean you have the tools to bridge it. In Peter’s case there may be larger issues at play. For example, what message does it send that Peter was transferred to Naucalpan when it appeared that Alex was being groomed for the job? Is there a bias — or even the perception of bias — whereby local nationals are not seen as being ready for senior leadership roles? What impact will this perception have on their engagement and productivity?

**Applying a Vectors Strategy:** Peter is in a difficult position. Attempting to drastically transform the culture of the plant would damage whatever mutual respect remains and cause only further harm. For immediate results Peter must identify the headwinds that can be overcome if he simply adjusts his behavior. Treating Alex with greater respect and inclusiveness would be a powerful first step. Shifting more decisions to the frontline managers might reduce the layers of hierarchy and spur engagement, thus increasing productivity and quality.

Once the plant is moving toward its production goals again, Peter can focus on long-term success for Naucalpan and managers whose own career aspirations may have been stalled by Cultural Norm headwinds.

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In a 2010 Economist Intelligence Unit survey, 62 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “We must respond more rapidly to new opportunities, even at the risk of making the wrong decisions.”
First steps toward neutralizing vectors

Boosting employee engagement is crucial for any leader who needs to increase productivity, better anticipate client needs, get to market more quickly, or create superior products and services. In other words, all of them. Eliminating detrimental Vectors from the workplace is a valuable approach, particularly as organizations strive to leverage the benefits of diversity, inclusion and globalization.

Organizations don’t have to wait for problems to arise to start addressing Vectors. Among the immediate steps that any company can take are:

• Incorporate inclusion skills into existing core leadership competencies and hold leaders accountable for exemplifying them.
• Make employee engagement a key performance indicator for all leaders and people managers.
• Provide managers with the resources and coaching to assess and address Vectors.
• Give talent management leaders a more strategic role in aligning practices and procedures with organizational goals.

Eliminating the Vectors that hamper growth — both personal and organizational — requires resources and participation by employees at all levels. At the same time, the benefits — greater inclusion and improved engagement — are evident throughout the organization.

A recent Korn/Ferry Institute study found that only one third of global leaders polled believed that their organization manages its talent effectively.
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About the Korn/Ferry Institute
The Korn/Ferry Institute generates forward-thinking research and viewpoints that illuminate how talent advances business strategy. Since its founding in 2008, the institute has published scores of articles, studies and books that explore global best practices in organizational leadership and human capital development.

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