Summary

This book, for the first time, tells a global audience the story of Diversity Icebreaker®, a concept of individual differences relevant for communication and interaction. The differences are named red, blue and green – traditional colours that are filled with meaning in a well-designed seminar. In the book, the author Bjørn Z. Ekelund describes how the categories evolved through focus groups in 1995 in Norway. The development was a part of a consultation process he led on behalf of the company Human Factors AS. The challenge was “How to communicate in order to effectively make all types of consumers reduce energy consumption?” Three strategies named red, blue and green were pivotal in the success in reducing the energy consumption in one of Norway's counties. The questionnaire used to map individual preferences for red, blue and green was later used in seminars with the ambition to bring awareness to individual differences and competencies in communication and teamwork. A seminar was formed in 2005, and the questionnaire and seminar were defined as Diversity Icebreaker®. Human Factors promoted the research and marketing of the concept and now it has been used by more than 250 000 people in 75 countries. The Diversity Icebreaker® has been successfully applied in interpersonal, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary processes. And for this reason, relevant for multidisciplinary wicked problems involving people from all over the world. In this book, Bjørn Z. Ekelund explains how Diversity Icebreaker as a concept can be applied to improve communication processes as well as high quality problem-solving and decision-making in even the most conflict-ridden and toughest contexts.

The questionnaire maps individual communication preferences in red (relations, emotions, etc), blue (tasks, practical, etc) and green (change, future, etc) dimensions. Red, blue and green can be seen as categories that describe the differences in how people treat information when solving problems together. The full meaning of these categories develops through group processes in the Diversity Icebreaker seminar. A local shared understanding is the aim, rather than referring to the general research on the concept.

Promoting alternative perspectives by seeing oneself and the others is an important element in the Diversity Icebreaker seminar. Learning about reality, learning about the way we see and make sense of reality and learning about how these processes happen, is about learning at three different stages. Naming, framing and re-framing is the short version that highlights the stages.

In the book the concept is described as a deep-level diversity phenomena, meaning that there are unconscious basic assumptions and values that form perception and preferences for interaction. Communication models are described that can help people overcome the
challenges of this type of diversity. Red, blue and green started out in marketing as a monologue, addressing different groups. But, it was also used to increase the quality of consultation in dialogues. Dialogue is contrasted in relation to discourse and debate where what is right, wrong or best are the main concerns. Trialogue, a concept introduced by the author, is the process where outsiders see the interaction pattern between two other persons or groups. The outsider’s observer perspective gives him/her a unique opportunity to see what is not easy to see for the actors themselves.

In the book there are two chapters on two other deep-level diversity phenomena. One of them is the deep-level-diversity that is created through education and professional practice, often named paradigms. Paradigms are the shared basic assumptions and practices inside specific scientific disciplines. In the professional arena, some people have such a dedication to their professional education that makes it difficult for them to see and acknowledge the valuable contributions of other professions. Some departments in organisations evolve a departmental culture that reflects the way members see and approach shared challenges and tasks. These departmental cultures are named epistemic cultures. For instance, conflicting epistemic cultures might develop between those close to the customer versus those embedded deeper in the hierarchy or professional administrative functions focused on activities within the organisation itself.

Another deep-level diversity issue is rooted in the upbringing in an ethnic group in a geographical area. This is the societal cultural heritage. Cross-cultural meetings are incidents that create awareness of cultural values and identity. Cultural dimensions are concepts that help make sense across different kinds of cultural settings. These dimensions, though, emerge out of the analysis of large data and have restricted precision when individuals meet. Cultural dimensions help guide in the sense-making of meeting others, from first impressions to more advanced understanding and personal knowledge of the individual person.

Creativity and innovation happen when new ideas are brought into group processes, leading to new knowledge and innovative practices. A well-managed group process of creativity in teams makes clear distinctions in what you do alone vs what you do together, when you open up for new ideas vs when you close the idea-generation process, and when you focus on the problem vs the solution. A model of basic structure is presented on how ideas can interact in order to create new knowledge. It explores three basic forms: influences between ideas, the integration of ideas, and a process where non-predictable ideas pop up.

Sometimes the focus in diversity is on how to increase efficiency in teams. The Team Pyramid is presented as a model that highlights seven qualities which are important for keeping focus: a climate of acknowledgement in teams is needed in order to make people feel safe in voicing their unique contribution. The management of the dilemma in group dynamics between focusing on “what we have in common” and “what is my uniqueness” is reframed into a question of heterogenization (increased focus on differences) or homogenization (increased focus on what people have in common) diverse teams. The
processes and goals of the team are something that need to be developed as a shared and respected team model in order to build trust for interpersonal teamwork. Having good experiences together and shared metaphors for teamwork contribute to improved motivation. Collective reflection is the ultimate capability, both for continued learning and quality control.

A challenge when people stand out with their uniqueness is to make everyone feel integrated within a group. Central concepts are those of inclusive community, trust and collective identity. Trust is defined with different elements. Empirical data from interdisciplinary teams is presented to illustrate how the quality of managing diversity is important in order to create well-functioning heterogeneous teams. I discuss how this outcome can be seen from a personal diversity perspective of red, blue and green, and what interdisciplinary qualities are needed in order to build inclusiveness. Cultural aspects are involved in a case study illustrating the elements needed in order to build trust in the Middle East.

In the last chapter, the economic practices that focus on financial outcomes for investors are criticized, as they do not systematically add value to human needs. Alternative models of economy are introduced, including the quadruple bottom line. Economy can be seen as a discipline of managing resources within a long-term perspective that makes sense in relation to our global human and ecological crisis. Two cases of values-based management illustrating the Norwegian work life context are presented. Three international cases are presented where Diversity Icebreaker is applied in complex contexts, where human and ecological challenges are addressed, and where cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and interpersonal differences are central elements. The chapter concludes by applying the humanities outside university contexts as a way of creating a dignified life, not only in work life contexts, but also elsewhere. Diversity Icebreaker is presented as a trigger of dignity. Collective reflexivity with a focus on implicit and explicit values and norms of the Diversity Icebreaker seminar is a training and developmental form mainly used in organisations that can lead individuals and communities more broadly into the process of continual improvement towards a more dignified society.