

# The “Cultural Fluency” Stimulus: Promising Practices for Turbulent Economic Times

By Phoebe Eng



Phoebe Eng is a leading strategist and futurist and an expert on how to use globalism and diversity to spur innovation. The importance of amplifying the voices of women and diverse communities is fundamental in her approach. Ms. Eng is the Vice Chair of the Ms. Foundation for Women and also sits on the Advisory Board of Working Mother Media's Best Companies

for Women of Color initiative. In 2005, Eng co-founded the national think tank, The Opportunity Agenda, which seeks to build the national will to expand opportunity for all. Ms. Eng is the author of *Warrior Lessons*, an examination of race, empowerment, and leadership in a rapidly changing world.

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“Fluency – the skill set of understanding the being understood – will be the defining quality of effective global leaders.”

- Phoebe Eng, Author and Strategist

It’s been official for many months now. As economists tell us, the effects of a recession will be with us for many years. In times like these, business spending decisions are being made reactively and often with the short term in mind, based on statistics released weekly on housing stats, job losses, or consumer confidence indices. For visionary leaders interested in building long term, values based institutions, these are certainly trying times.

As leaders committed to developing the long term potential of diversity, how can we hold steady in our vision, despite shrinking spending and heightened anxiety about the economy? How might we guide limited resources smartly, to projects that will sustain our company’s commitment to diversity while we wait for brighter economic times?

The answer is this: *In tough economic times, invest proactively and strategically in your “cultural fluency” infrastructure.*

In the same way that President Obama’s Stimulus package is geared toward establishing the foundation of a new economy, companies would do well to invest in their own infrastructure and capacity to elevate “culturally fluent” leaders and the skill sets of fluency. Just as the Stimulus package supports new transport lines, energy sources, and technology for a more sustainable and stable future, we can direct strategic investment into “fluency hubs” – the already-existing venues and programs that have proven track records as magnets for culturally fluent employees and leaders, across disciplines and departments.

Why are fluency hubs such an important piece of infrastructure? Because they have the power to facilitate dialogue, encourage diverse input, and maintain open door policies that enable them to serve in the coming years as key idea and partnership generating engines of global organizations. Supporting infrastructure and “fluency capacity” now can position a company as both a field innovator and effective dealmaker for decades to come.

## The Qualities of Fluency Hubs

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Leaders in the emerging field of network science believe that today’s companies need to consider moving from a focus on expansion and scalable efficiency to scalable learning and performance. Fluency hubs allow an organization to leverage its learning and collaborative capacity, through its role as a network node.

Fluency hubs can take many forms. Whether housed within a department or operating independently, whether in the private or public sector:

- ◆ **They encourage strategic “looking outward”** for new partners, particularly those representing new, diverse markets or audiences and those that possess unconventional and eye-opening viewpoints.

- ◆ **They possess earned legitimacy** with many departments of the company. That legitimacy allows them to build intra-company support and move quickly on decisions. Their teams are interdisciplinary.
- ◆ **They actively facilitate**, and train others to facilitate, problem solving discourse across departments and cultures. And the facilitators themselves represent a diversity of cultures and viewpoints. Their listening skills have been cultivated and fine-tuned.
- ◆ **They are led by professionals** that have proven track records in successful negotiation, strategic planning, and program deployment.

And while fluency hubs may often originate from a company’s diversity mandate, the fluent practices of any existing team, whether in sales, brand management, product development, research, or management training, can likewise be built into a fluency hub. Fluency hubs might also emerge from a company’s affinity groups, its leadership academies, the President’s office, or the internal, interdisciplinary teams charged with strategic growth.

There are benefits to investing in fluency hubs, even during an economic downturn. First, those that are able to invest now will be well positioned as the economy revives and the battle for culturally fluent talent around the globe intensifies. Second, relatively small, steady investment in a company’s fluency hubs can build workforce morale and goodwill. It can earn a company the coveted position as an employer of choice for the world’s best talent and inject a sense of future prosperity into a company’s culture— all rare qualities that can distinguish a workplace, especially during trying economic times.

Two initiatives, the Global Perspectives Program in Orlando, Florida, and the Diversity Council at Bayer’s corporate center in Berkeley, California, offer examples of how, even in turbulent times, institutions are preparing for future advantage, investing in their fundamental ability to serve as fluency hubs.

## **Investing in an Idea Factory: Orlando’s Global Perspectives Office as a Fluency Hub**

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Orlando is home to the Global Perspectives Office of the University of Central Florida, where an exciting form of fluency hub is being built. Housed within a university environment at the behest of its President, the Global Perspectives Office has become a destination for high level international knowledge exchange and a global relationship broker for the region’s academic and business leaders.

**Global Ambassador/Global Broker.** Orlando may be known best as the home of Disneyworld, but Orlando’s residents understand that the city has even more to offer. A leading city in areas spanning from health care, to digital media, to business innovation, Orlando also placed on *Forbes* and *Wired* lists for their “Most Wired Cities.” More than 150 companies representing approximately 20 countries have facilities in metro Orlando, and the city is a mecca for entrepreneurs. Orlando was also named by *Fast Company* as one of the “12 Best Cities for Innovation.” As a fluency hub, the Global Perspectives Office serves as an ambassador for this prolific city, facilitating the exchange of ideas and contacts internationally.

The Global Perspectives office is led by Pulitzer Prize winning writer, John Bersia, who over the past several years has been attracting world class thinkers to the Orlando community. Many of his overseas and national guests become regular contributors to the Orlando community,

generating ideas, connections, and sharing their networks with Bersia and his colleagues. Over the years, the relationships generated through Global Perspectives programs have led to innovative approaches to urban development, environmental protection, and diplomacy in the Middle East and Asia.

**Chance and Diversity.** What makes the Global Perspectives Office so successful? There is something about the combination of chance and diversity, says Bersia, that is necessary for innovation. He believes that innovative projects often take shape unexpectedly when people across disciplines, cultures, and viewpoints are able to engage in dialogue. Without a set place, a “go-to destination,” within an organization that prioritizes relationship and network building, where new introductions can be made that aren’t always planned or preconceived, innovation suffers. Without people who are expert bridge builders within an organization, valuable opportunities are lost.

Expert bridge builders abound at the Global Perspectives Office. Key “hands on” leaders include US ambassadors, international arts leaders, and culture watchers, all who interact frequently and directly with city leaders as well as students while maintaining their international travel. Regional business leaders and world-renowned writers such as Newsweek’s Fareed Zakaria, academics from the Rand Corporation, Brookings, and Yale, help shape the Office’s programs.

## Investing in Planning: Bayer’s Diversity Council as a Fluency Hub

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On the other side of the country, in California, another form of fluency hub is taking shape, as a highly prolific regional leadership group within a multinational company.

Despite the recession, the Bayer Corporation’s California office has invested steadily in its Berkeley Diversity Council since 1998. The Council, made up of west coast employees across all departments, representing 47 countries and speaking 32 languages, is one of the company’s key sites in promoting dialogue on diversity issues. The Council is now a firmly established presence where employees can turn for solutions to diversity-related challenges.

Members of the Berkeley Diversity Council understand that their role as a trusted and experienced convenor of different viewpoints holds tremendous value, and that their value will only grow in the future. Situated in the international technology and cultural mecca of Berkeley, CA, the Diversity Council has for decades seen a future that many more U.S. cities will experience soon – a highly connected, multicultural, global economy, and society.

**Structural Independence.** As a volunteer organization within Bayer, with a senior manager or VP as lead sponsor, the Council is free to align itself with company initiatives, but remains structurally independent – an advantage worth noting.

With structural independence, the Council has been able to determine its own priorities and roles, without having to fall within the parameters or limitations of a specific department. Independence has also allowed the Council to prioritize employee engagement, cultural learning, and bridge building without having to answer to a short term bottom line. As Council Co-Chair Connie Hart noted, the Diversity Council’s interdisciplinary, extra-departmental position frees them to bring together constituents from both within and outside of the company as needed, based on the particular event or initiative. Training for leadership within the Council is also a key priority, requiring several years of commitment to prepare for its top positions.

**Imperative Questions.** The Diversity Council has earned the company several national awards, with top rankings in its management commitment, outreach efforts, measurement and accountability of their programs. In addition to hosting cultural celebrations for employees, the Diversity Council is now building its capacity for the coming years, exploring timely questions that every emerging fluency hub should be asking, such as:

- ◆ How can they encourage substantive, more collaborative work with the company’s senior leaders? What specific goals might these two groups work toward together?
- ◆ How can the Diversity Council deepen its ability to be a facilitator and instigator of difficult conversations while continuing to build strong alliances both in and out of the company, both domestically and internationally?
- ◆ How does the Diversity Council become more adept at bringing various arms of the company together to engage meaningfully in planning and problem solving? What types of outreach are required?

## A Strategic Investment that Pays

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Just as Stimulus dollars are funding projects that prepare us for the future, a company’s investment into fluency hubs builds the infrastructure that will prepare us to navigate complex and difficult conversations brought on by increasing globalism and interdisciplinary approaches.

Within those venues, we will need facilitators with deep cross-cultural knowledge, who have respect for consensus building. Those facilitators, in turn, will require the accountability of key leaders, as well as the earned respect of a wide ranging network of potential partners that span the business, civic, and international communities. The need for quality fluency hubs, and the trained expertise to lead them, will only intensify in the future.

Currently, there are very few effective hubs that can operate at all these levels. But with leadership intention and a well-designed set of strategic investments, fluency hubs can proliferate.

*Phoebe Eng’s next article will explore the qualities of more “fluency hubs” and best practices in cultural fluency around the country. For questions and comments about this article, contact Phoebe Eng at [PhoebeEng2009@gmail.com](mailto:PhoebeEng2009@gmail.com).*

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