

Building a House for Diversity - The Giraffe and the Elephant

By: R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr with Marjorie I. Woodruff, American Management Association, New York, 1999

In a small suburban community just outside the city of Artiodact, a giraffe had a new home built to his family's specifications. It was a wonderful house for giraffes, with soaring ceilings and tall doorways. High windows ensured maximum light and good views while protecting the family's privacy. Narrow hallways saved valuable space without compromising convenience. So well done was the house that it won the national Giraffe Home of the Year Award. The home's owners were understandably proud.

One day the giraffe, working in his state-of-the-art wood shop in the basement, happened to look out the window. Coming down the street was an elephant. "I know him," he thought. "We worked together on a PTA committee. He's an excellent woodworker too. I think I'll ask him in to see my new shop. Maybe we can even work together on some projects." So the giraffe reached his head out the window and invited the elephant in.

The elephant was delighted; he had liked working with the giraffe and looked forward to knowing him better. Besides, he knew about the wood shop and wanted to see it. So he walked up to the basement door and waited for it to open.

"Come in; come in," the giraffe said. But immediately they encountered a problem. While the elephant could get his head in the door, he could go no farther.

"It's a good thing we made this door expandable to accommodate my wood shop equipment," the giraffe said. "Give me a minute while I take care of our problem." He removed some bolts and panels to allow the elephant in.

The acquaintances were happily exchanging wood-working stories when the giraffe's wife leaned her head down the basement stairs and called out to her husband: "Telephone, dear; it's your boss." "I'd better take that upstairs in the den," the giraffe told the elephant. "Please make yourself at home; this may take a while."

The elephant looked around, saw a half-finished project on the lathe table in the far corner, and decided to explore it further. As he moved through the doorway that led to that area of the shop, however, he heard an ominous scrunch. He backed out, scratching his head. "Maybe I'll join the giraffe upstairs," he thought. But as he started up the stairs, he heard them begin to crack. He jumped off and fell against the wall. It too began to crumble. As he sat there dishevelled and dismayed, the giraffe came down the stairs.

"What on earth is happening here?" the giraffe asked in amazement. "I was trying to make myself at home," the elephant said. The giraffe looked around. "OK, I see the problem. The doorway is too narrow. We'll have to make you smaller. There's an aerobics studio near here. If you take some classes there, we could get you down to size."

In this book, R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr uses this fable concerning the giraffe and the elephant as the vehicle by which diversity is explored and wrestled with in the workplace. Through the stories of eleven people, including Phil Jackson, the legendary coach of the Chicago Bulls, he shows the struggles that people have had

to work more effectively with differences and similarities demonstrated by the workforce of today.