The world is more diverse than ever before, a multicultural mosaic of endless variety. Across this landscape, there are dozens of ways in which we differentiate and define ourselves: by gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, orientation, marital status, education and geographical location. Add to that professional diversity, such as job title, industry, work experience, management status and a host of views and styles regarding work, leadership, communication and conflict resolution. The possibilities are seemingly endless.

Diversity acknowledges what makes us who we are as individuals. Celebrating the richness of that diversity is the heritage of trailblazing societal changes that have empowered people to stand up for themselves and their identities. But diversity, alone, is not enough.

Inclusion is diversity’s companion. While diversity honors our differences, inclusion bridges them. When a particular work environment or society is inclusive, there is a seat for everyone at the table. Conversations become enriched and exchanges of ideas gain texture as people contribute viewpoints and perspectives from how they see, experience and participate in the world.

Across a diverse global landscape, it is only human nature to seek out affinities with others, whether they have the same nationality, religion, language or other commonalities from political beliefs to socioeconomic backgrounds. Connections can be fleeting or they can be deep and long-lasting. My son, Jack, experienced this the other day when he struck up a conversation with someone who had a different ethnic background, but with whom he shared a strong commonality. Both fluent in Spanish, they were able to literally speak each other’s language.

The desire to connect is encoded in our human DNA. As we become interconnected, we complete the cycle that begins with diversity and inclusion. When we reach the point of interconnectedness, we do not lose the richness of diversity; rather, we see how diversity becomes inclusion and then interconnectedness as part of the greater whole.

One of the most powerful ways to establish interconnectedness is with a common vision. Within an organization, this is achieved around purpose—the “why” of its existence. While a for-profit enterprise obviously exists to make money, that cannot be its only purpose. Rather it must define the
ways in which it is uniquely changing the world on behalf of others. Otherwise, its purpose will not be compelling enough to bring employees together and keep them aligned.

It takes leadership to define and communicate a purpose that pulls people together. When team members understand the “why” of what they are doing, self-interest is transformed into shared interest. The more participants understand that purpose, the more they will become aligned with it. They will find their place within that purpose in a way that honors their individuality, their uniqueness, their diversity.

Interconnectedness around purpose also preserves the fabric of an organization no matter what change it encounters, externally or internally. Over the past several years, Korn Ferry has completed several acquisitions—all strategic in terms of expanding our global footprint as the leader in executive search and talent management. Numbers on paper, no matter how good they look, are not what makes an acquisition successful. It’s all about alignment with the purpose—bringing co-workers together to pursue the greater “why.”

Without that alignment, culture clashes can derail even the most strategic-looking merger.

When one company acquires another, the result is often “Noah’s Ark”—two of everything, and very often in key positions. Aware of the overlap, staffers become nervous. Uncertainty about what will happen to their jobs can quickly lead to mistrust and departure of key employees. The same professionals who made the acquired firm attractive in the first place could very well be the first ones heading to the exit!

For that reason, when Korn Ferry makes an acquisition, I take pains to communicate purpose. I personally make as many as 100 or more calls to employees in the acquired firm to explain our “why”—our purpose—which is all about changing people’s lives. These communications start a conversation among those who are new to our firm, helping to spread the word about what differentiates our culture and what it means to be part of it. This conversation is echoed within Korn Ferry, too, to remind us why we do what we do—

“With purpose as the true north to which everything is oriented, diverse pieces come together in a greater whole.”