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Thinking About Five Strategies for Making Diversity Work

Abstract

Greater diversity in the workplace introduces the possibility for increased misunderstanding and conflict at the same time as it holds out the promise of creativity and innovation. Workplace diversity change leaders have learned that making diversity work cannot be taken for granted. We cannot automatically assume that people will engage well with others across differences. Our history with bias, inequity and exclusion remains too much a part of how we understand one another. Making diversity work represents a mindset shift in the way people interact and engage. Organizations that are serious about creating inclusive work environments—where everyone feels welcomed, respected, and valued for who they are—recognize the importance of how people work together. Relationship building across differences needs to be developed and nurtured. Inclusive organizations focus on creating internal culture change to build people skills and promote shared expectations for mutual respect— an evolving endeavor. I'd like to add to the conversation by offering several observations for what this mindset shift might entail.

Keywords

workplace, diversity, human resources, conflict, resolution, dispute, respect

Comments

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Building Working Relationships/Improving Outcomes

THINKING ABOUT Five Strategies for Making Diversity Work

Susan Woods, Managing Partner, Henderson Woods LLC

Greater diversity in the workplace introduces the possibility for increased misunderstanding and conflict at the same time as it holds out the promise of creativity and innovation. Workplace diversity change leaders have learned that making diversity work cannot be taken for granted. We cannot automatically assume that people will engage well with others across differences. Our history with bias, inequity and exclusion remains too much a part of how we understand one another. Making diversity work represents a mindset shift in the way people interact and engage. Organizations that are serious about creating inclusive work environments—where everyone feels welcomed, respected, and valued for who they are—recognize the importance of how people work together. Relationship building across differences needs to be developed and nurtured. Inclusive organizations focus on creating internal culture change to build people skills and promote shared expectations for mutual respect— an evolving endeavor. I'd like to add to the conversation by offering several observations for what this mindset shift might entail.

We often hear diversity practitioners say: “Diversity is part of the fabric of an organization.” I’ve always appreciated this image. To me it captures recognition of diversity as an integrated understanding that influences how people respect one another, how we interact on an everyday basis as well as professionally, how we engage in learning and decision-making. It’s part of the give and take that defines an organization’s character. Making diversity work is about relationship and learning.

We also hear reference to another frequent remark —“He (or she) gets it.” — and the reverse — “They just don’t understand.” Although not specifically defined, these remarks likely reference the shift in mindset needed to create a workplace environment that is inclusive, where diversity works and people feel welcomed, recognized, and valued for the talent and diversity of perspectives they bring.

Making differences work is not easy, especially given the dynamics of prejudice, inequity and power-based exclusion in current society. Building genuine and honest relationships across differences is more than an issue of good intentions.

Relationship building is complex. What works for one person may not work for another. What appears fair from one person's experience may represent inequity and injustice from another's. What one person feels is earned, another interprets as a reflection of privilege. These are complex questions that defy easy solutions, in part because we are each unique individuals as well as members of groups.

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Diversity often puts us in unfamiliar contexts, pushing the envelopes of our comfort zones. It may challenge how we view ourselves as well as others, triggering a whole host of emotions, confronting our identities, leaving us feeling vulnerable, defensive, defiant, betrayed, excluded, confused, uncertain, unsettled, and tired, to name a few. Of course, when diversity works, we feel respected, enriched, empowered and accomplished. The emphasis on self-awareness as well as awareness of others is real. Bottom-line, making diversity work demands a healthy sense of self-worth. It's requires us to recognize the value we bring in positive affirmative ways, rather than in negative reference to others.

As a professional who has worked in this field for many years, I cannot say that I have the answer. But I have my list of perspectives which I connect with the mind shift needed to make diversity work. If I were to sum it up in two words, those words would be *relationship* and *learning*. Relationships across differences are built on mutual respect where differences are recognized and valued. Learning comes from openness to multiple perspectives, to acknowledging “more-than-one-way,” and focusing not on right and wrong, but on how differences in perspective can inform and enrich our understanding. Mutual respect is a complicated dynamic. We tend to think about it as being rooted in fair treatment and in civility. We need to recognize a third aspect — influence. A sense of mutual respect happens when each person recognizes value in the other person's presence.

So here are a few observations to consider in the conversation of needed mindset shifts for making diversity work.

RECOGNIZE MORE-THAN-ONE-WAY

Have the courage to think out of the box of one's own perspective. We know that we each interpret the world around us through the lens of our own diversity: our race, gender, culture, generation, sexual orientation, education, work expertise, and the list goes on. Recognizing more-than-one-

way begins with becoming self-aware, with recognizing the assumptions we each use to navigate the complex world around us. It also means keeping alert to realize when those assumptions aren't shared with others whose experience differs from our own. I recently came across a striking example of thinking differently.

In the Western thought, we generally view time as running from left to right. Consider a chart with time running along the bottom axis from left to right. Lera Boroditski, a psychologist from Stanford University, and Alice Gaby, a linguist at UCLA Berkeley, are exploring differences in the way groups conceive time. The Pormpuraawan Aborigines, living in a remote part of Australia, conceive of time with a spacial reference from east to west. The day after tomorrow becomes “two days to the west.” Time is represented through spacial reference, rather than linear.

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I realize this is an example we are unlikely to encounter in our everyday lives, but consider differences we do encounter. Think about the changing assumptions and expectations introduced into the workplace through the presence of greater numbers of women in traditionally male fields, of single parents, of people with diverse religious beliefs and customs. These are issues of difference; not right and wrong. Beginning from an expectation of more-than-one-way opens the door to learning, mutual respect and new possibility.

TAKE THE TIME TO EXPLORE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Often we identify similarities to establish the connection and rapport to create openness for exploring differences. Diversity learning doesn't happen all at once; it is an evolving process built on experience and relationship. Two skills are essential: dialogue and suspending judgment while listening. Unlike a one-way conversation, dialogue provides us all an opportunity to tell our own story. Dialogue focuses on listening to learn, not challenge. Questions are used to clarify meaning and to check back to confirm understanding. William Isaacs in *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* says dialogue is like “a conversation with center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before.”

When we give ourselves the freedom to separate listening from evaluation and decision-making, we create the possibility for learning. Snap judgment,

jumping to conclusions, assigning intention as another's story is unfolding compromise our ability to appreciate diverse perspectives. Evaluation and decision-making can come later. With dialogue this is a collective process of realization. Making diversity work is about each of us influencing the other without demanding that any of us lose identity.

PRACTICE OPEN-MINDEDNESS AND FLEXIBILITY

The essence of diversity is that one size doesn't fit all. Diversity brings the complexity and richness of human experience to the forefront. It defies boxes and easy formulas. The same event conveys different meaning depending on one's perspective. Relationship building calls for keeping an open mind to the unfamiliar. For example, something as simple as deciding what to wear every day is of far more complex significance to someone who is transgendered than for others whose gender identity has never been a question.

In a diverse world, treating everyone exactly the same may not mean we are treating them fairly because sameness may carry diverse consequences across difference. We generally consider it fair to offer reasonable accommodation so that people with disabilities can perform their jobs. Although this represents different treatment, it serves to level the playing field so that everyone has a chance to perform their jobs to a consistent standard of work performance.

Open-mindedness and flexibility are essential, although not always readily understood. We should anticipate ambiguity and allow ourselves the leeway to work through uneasiness and confusion. Making diversity work is about recognizing difference, not suppressing one person's or group's identity to another. Forcing assimilation to a dominate group as though their way were the only way suppresses honest relationship building.

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LEARN FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF OTHERS

Diversity is a resource to each of us because it opens the door to new talent and to new ways of thinking, exploring issues, problem-solving, evaluating and decision-making. Each of us brings perceptions, views, assumptions and methods rooted in our individual experience as well the experience of the groups with which we identify. This diversity of thought is a rich, if under-realized, resource. We need to extend the much accepted idea that "two

heads of better than one” to recognize the potential of being able to look at a situation from a diversity of insight.

WHAT WOULD
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BLOCK?

The potential for greater creativity and innovation through diversity is not a new idea. Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect*, says innovation happens “at the intersection” of ideas, concepts and cultures. Scott T. Page, a scholar of complex systems, identifies a related dynamic in *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies*. He calls it the “Diversity Trumps Ability” principle. As I understand it, the idea is that a non-diverse group of thinkers share, and will be limited by, the same set of assumptions and methods. When those are exhausted, they’re done. In a diverse group, individuals still get stuck on their own assumptions, but the assumptions vary. Where one is stuck, another continues. On an organizational level, the “Learning and Effectiveness” strategy, suggested by Thomas and Ely in the now classic *Harvard Business Review* article “Making Difference Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity,” is about leveraging this potential.

I recall reading once about the experience of “Rosie the Riveters”, women entering the factories during WWII. In one instance, a bolt needed to be coated in a liquid substance, but after it was dipped and laid flat to dry, the coating was disturbed. One of the women on the line suggested adapting the process she used at home to make sugar coated donuts. The donut was dipped and hung by a string until the sugar coating was dried. Problem resolved.

Greater diversity assists us to recognize our assumptions and to think out of the box. Making diversity work calls for each of us to be curious about diverse perspectives and approaches, to acknowledge the value of learning from others and to be alert for ideas we may have rejected because they were unfamiliar. We can each of us step back to ask: *What would this diverse perspective or approach allow me to accomplish that my own assumptions block?*

STRIVE FOR MUTUAL SOLUTIONS

When conflict does happens, making diversity work turns on discovering mutual solutions where everyone feels respected and recognized in the outcome and sees value in continuing relationship. It is not about determining winners and losers.

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When conflict does emerge, how it is handled is critical. Diversity related conflict is difficult because it cannot always be resolved around a particular incident; sometimes diffusing tension is the best that can happen.

Disagreement may be driven more by relationship and sense of disrespect than by the immediate substantive content of the dispute. The conflict may challenge group identity as well as individual sense of self. An everyday situation may be rooted in history and memory of power imbalance and injustice. It may set in motion dynamics that are unrecognized and unintended by one side, but deeply felt and interpreted with certainty by the other. Emotions are triggered; parties become defensive. Often both sides bring legitimate perspectives when viewed from the vantage point of their own experience.

Making diversity work is about creating a safe environment that allows both sides to tell their story, to surface and acknowledge one another's underlying concerns and to work together in the search for a resolution both can relate to. Making diversity work is about creating opportunity from conflict and diversity of thought. It's about empowering change. Relationship and learning.



Susan Woods is Managing Partner with Henderson Woods, LLC, a workplace resource for facilitation, training and learning services for issues of diversity and inclusion and collaborative conflict resolution.
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