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ILR Impact Brief – Diversity at Work: Cross-Racial Bonds on the Job

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Abstract
Diversity proponents argue that expanding the pool of human and social capital within organizations can sharpen their competitive edge. Researchers generally agree that supportive coworker relationships based on trust and expressive, self-revealing ties positively affect individual and organizational performance. But making the most out of diverse perspectives remains a critical challenge; cooperating, sharing information, and synthesizing knowledge are the processes that turn diversity into value. This study explores the factors that facilitate these all-important personal associations above and beyond what would normally be expected within racially-mixed work units.

Keywords
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Diversity at Work: Cross-Racial Bonds on the Job

Research question: What factors enable African-American and white coworkers to develop the type of close personal bonds that allow organizations to benefit from having a diverse workforce?

Conclusion: The ratio of African-Americans to whites in a work group affects the prevalence of supportive personal interactions between members of each group; that said, certain workplace attributes moderate the impact of this demographic proportionality. Both minority tokenism and minority overrepresentation in work units may inhibit the formation of trusting relationships; i.e., minorities and majorities tend to turn inward until some unspecified racial balance is reached. This own-group propensity may be mitigated by the presence of a “support climate” in which workers share a perception that they can count on peers, regardless of race, for emotional and operational support. Further research is needed to identify other moderating factors.

Workplace impact: Creating value from diversity requires more than simply increasing the number of minorities in the workplace. More contact between “dissimilar others” does not, on its own, engender the mutually supportive relationships that other research has shown is necessary to generate organizational gains. Diversity management strategies should include interventions that enhance the climate of peer support within work units.

Abstract: Diversity proponents argue that expanding the pool of human and social capital within organizations can sharpen their competitive edge. Researchers generally agree that supportive coworker relationships based on trust and expressive, self-revealing ties positively affect individual and organizational performance. But making the most out of diverse perspectives remains a critical challenge; cooperating, sharing information, and synthesizing knowledge are the processes that turn diversity into value. This study explores the factors that facilitate these all-important personal associations above and beyond what would normally be expected within racially-mixed work units.

The research literature suggests several reasons why supportive peer relationships affect performance. First, coworkers in the habit of helping each other tend to have higher morale and group cohesiveness, which in turn minimizes conflict and the voluntary departure of good employees. Second, personal attachments sustain empathy and reciprocity, which may promote the exchange of knowledge and heighten responsiveness to shifts in the operating environment. Third, cohesive social networks based on supportive relationships may help enforce group norms related to work ethic and organizational control. The literature also posits that within demographically diverse work units, the vector from supportive peer relationships to performance may be particularly relevant because interracial contacts in
society at large are often limited, informed by negative stereotypes, and fraught with discomfort and anxiety.

Organizations keen to capture the benefits of diversity, then, should first aim to create and sustain the helping peer relationships that can lead to performance gains. Some researchers have argued that task interdependence bolsters supportive peer relationships because the success that flows from forced cooperation diminishes bias and promotes positive feelings toward racially different others. Increased contact between racial groups in demographically diverse settings, achieved by altering the ratio between white and African-American workers, is also believed by some researchers to reduce levels of intolerance and stereotyping. Still other researchers claim that the work climate, specifically one that nurtures common expectations of help-seeking and help-giving, can lower the risk of racially-dissimilar peers turning to each other for aid and support, thereby enabling the development of deep personal connections.

For this study, workers’ answers to an extensive questionnaire yielded some surprising results about diversity and performance. Contrary to the researchers’ initial expectations, greater degrees of task interdependence within work units did not enhance the relative prevalence of supportive peer relationships. The data also did not support the notion that more opportunity for interaction between African-American and white coworkers promoted stronger bonds. Rather, the prevalence of supportive relationships between the two racial groups was inversely related to the proportion of minority workers in the group; in other words, same-race peers closed ranks when they felt socially isolated or feared a loss of status.

Although degrees of diversity clearly affected the nature and extent of interpersonal interactions within work groups, this study also revealed that certain social dynamics moderated the impact of a group’s racial makeup. Specifically, the researchers found that the tendency towards in-group interpersonal associations was weakened by a culture that fostered shared expectations of mutual assistance. Such a “unit support climate” positively affected the prevalence of peer relationships based on personal and emotional ties above the level that would otherwise be expected. In a related finding, the data indicated that as heterogeneity within work groups increased (i.e., more members of other minority groups), supportive relations between white and African-American peers tended to improve. In sum, organizations seeking to capitalize on workforce diversity should adopt policies and practices that create and sustain both the perception and the reality of supportive interpersonal relationships rooted in strong emotional ties.

Methodology: The researchers distributed a survey to 6,720 workers in New York State, who belonged to one of six unions, seeking information on race, ethnicity, gender, the work unit, task interdependency, and relationships with peers. The initial response rate was 46.2%, although for technical reasons only 1,247 responses were included in the data analysis. The researchers noted several limitations to their study, including technical matters, the union-only population, the New York State-only sampling, and the focus on only whites and African-Americans.


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