Controlling the Climate: Inclusion Can Have Positive Impact on Gender-Diverse Groups

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Abstract

Key Findings

• Typically, relationship conflicts cause people to feel personally attacked and defensive, causing dissatisfaction among organization members who feel uncomfortable working among hostile coworkers (Jehn, 1994; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). Prior research has found that conflict can be particularly problematic in diverse groups. However, this research found that not only is relationship conflict less likely in gender diverse groups that have inclusive climates, but when such conflicts do occur, employees are better able to address the conflict in ways that don't demoralize group members. The results suggest that in inclusive climates employees may be more "integrating" conflict resolution styles, which enable team members to arrive at better solutions because they are characterized by a dual concern for self and others (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979).

• In contrast, in less inclusive climates, people may be more likely to exhibit high concern for self but low concern for demographically different others and therefore adopt either a "competing" or "dominating" style, leading to patterns of conflict that are destructive for the group.

• Finally, the results of the current study provide compelling initial evidence about the beneficial effects of inclusive climates. Employers can provide the opportunity for employees to develop more meaningful connections with diverse others provided they can help cultivate inclusive norms, and employees need to be aware that they co-create their climate. Teams that invest in a process of establishing connections and norms where divided perspectives are drawn out will benefit the most. Research implies that when groups have inclusive climates there's more learning and creativity.

Keywords
relationship conflicts, groups, inclusion, climate

Disciplines
Human Resources Management | Organizational Behavior and Theory

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Key Findings

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- Finally, the results of the current study provide compelling initial evidence about the beneficial effects of inclusive climates. Employers can provide the opportunity for employees to develop more meaningful connections with diverse others provided they can help cultivate inclusive climates. Leaders need to be aware of role modeling and creating inclusive norms, and employees need to be aware that they co-create their climate. Teams that invest in a process of establishing connections and norms where divided perspectives are drawn out
will benefit the most. Research implies that when groups have inclusive climates there’s more learning and creativity.

**Can Inclusion Reduce Conflict Among Diverse Groups?**

The finding that climate for inclusion plays an important role in reducing levels of conflict in diverse groups should be of great interest to organizations, given recent reports from the United States (U.S.) Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2012) that discrimination and harassment charges are on the rise for every single social category that is protected under federal law. This alarming report suggests that organizations continue to struggle to create work environments in which interpersonal interactions are positive and unbiased. Creating inclusive climates requires more than increasing diverse representation and implementing equitable human resources (HR) practices; it requires a change in interaction patterns. The three dimensions that constitute climate for inclusion include:

- **The first dimension** – fairness of employment practices. The research argues that the elimination of the “disproportionate allocation of positive and negative social value across the social status hierarchy” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999: 41) through the fair treatment of employees is a foundational requirement, as it eliminates social stigmas that can lead people to hide aspects of their identity and thinking (Hewlin, 2003). Recent work by Leonardelli and Toh (2011) suggests that when employees perceive that members of different groups are treated fairly by authorities, those employees are more likely to engage in positive interactions across group memberships.

- **The second dimension** of inclusion – integration of differences – captures the interpersonal integration of diverse employees at work. Work facades of conformity (Hewlin, 2003, 2009) and surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) suggests that when people constrain their emotions and behaviors in order to construct public representations of themselves that are aligned with desired organizational personas, they suffer from strain and psychologically disengage from their work (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005).
Finally, the **third dimension** -- inclusion in decision making -- captures the extent to which the diverse perspectives of employees are actively sought and integrated, even if expressed ideas might upset the status quo (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998). In inclusive climates, the questioning of dominant assumptions is not seen as a threat, but rather as a value-enhancing proposition, and thus barriers that could perpetuate organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) are actively eliminated. Democratic decision-making processes have been hailed by some as critical for the reduction of stereotypes and bias (e.g., Green & Kalev, 2008).

An effective place to start in improving an organization’s climate for inclusion would be to carefully monitor HR outcomes and employee perceptions of the fairness of employment practices to reveal biases that may stand in the way of making meaningful improvements to the other two dimensions.

**The Study Questions**

- **What is an inclusive climate?**

- **Does a unit’s climate for inclusion moderate the relationship between gender diversity and relationship conflict?** Are lower levels of relationship conflict experienced in gender-diverse groups that enjoy highly inclusive climates than in diverse groups with climates that are not as inclusive?

- **Does a unit’s climate for inclusion moderate the relationship between gender diversity and task conflict?** Are lower levels of task conflict experienced more in gender-diverse groups that enjoy highly inclusive climates than in gender-diverse groups with climates that are not as inclusive?

- **Is the negative relationship between task conflict and satisfaction attenuated or reversed in highly inclusive climates?**

- **Is unit-level satisfaction is negatively associated with unit-level turnover?**
Figure 1: Interaction of Climate for Inclusion and Gender Diversity in Predicting Relationship Conflict

Figure 1: In inclusive climates, fairly implemented employment practices that do not bias against women, combined with valuing the perspectives of men and women equally, signal to employees that women have a proportional share of social value. In contrast, when gender-based status differences are noticeable, employees will potentially be motivated to demean others on the basis of gender in order to enhance their own status (Berdahl, 2007). Members of the higher-status group are likely to be perceived with envy, and members of lower-status groups are likely to be perceived with contempt (Caprariello Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009), both of which perpetuate mistrust and conflict (Brewer, 1999).
Figure 2: Interaction of Climate for Inclusion and Relationship Conflict in Predicting Unit Satisfaction

**Figure 2:** In inclusive climates, relationship conflict does not appear to damage unit morale; in fact, the plotted interaction shows a slight positive relationship between relationship conflict and unit satisfaction in inclusive climates, though this slope was not significant. It may be that the relationship conflicts that do arise are interpreted not as personal attacks, but as valued signals that group members may not understand each other as well as they had thought. Given that expressions of inter-personal difference are considered critical for the development of collective cultural competence and improved work processes in inclusive climates, group members who become involved in relationship conflict invest the time and energy necessary to ensure that learning, rather than antagonism, results from the conflicts. Ultimately, if coworkers are able to successfully resolve and learn from relationship conflicts, unit morale is likely to be preserved.

**Companies Can’t Afford Uniformity**

Using data collected from employees in 100 units of an organization, this research found that both relationship and task conflict were significantly lower in gender-diverse groups with high climate for inclusion than in diverse groups with
low climate for inclusion. Perhaps even more remarkable is that the negative association between relationship conflict and satisfaction disappears when climate for inclusion is high.

There are a number of theoretical and practical implications of these findings. Recent work by Leonardelli and Toh (2011) provides some support for this idea; they found that when employees perceive that members of different groups are treated fairly by authorities, those employees are more likely to engage in positive interactions across group memberships. Thus, an effective place to start in improving an organization’s climate for inclusion would be to carefully monitor HR outcomes and employee perceptions of the fairness of employment practices to reveal biases that may stand in the way of making meaningful improvements to the other two dimensions.

The results of this study also contribute to the discourse on the business case for diversity (Cox, 1993), that typically get in the way of realizing the value in inclusive climates, and that the economic savings of doing so are likely to be substantial. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2008), the costs of turnover are estimated to be as high as 200 to 250 percent of annual pay for some jobs, which is a sizable amount for any organization, but particularly for organizations with highly skilled employees, as was the case with the organizations participating in this research.

These estimates do not account for losses in core strategic knowledge, which can be debilitating in knowledge-intensive units like the research and development groups represented in the current sample. Besides the cost savings associated with lower levels of turnover, organizations that successfully reduce levels of relationship conflict should enjoy higher performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and fewer legal problems associated with claims of harassment and/or more generalized interpersonal mistreatment (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000).

The Data Source

In total, data from 1,324 employees working in 100 departments of a regional site of the company were collected. Of them, 57 percent were female and 43 percent were male.
The Takeaway

As companies increasingly depend on innovation to foster long-term growth and success, it is critical that the downside of diversity be addressed. Solutions that can make productive debate possible while also enhancing cooperation and learning are essential. An important starting point may be to minimize divisive conflict by reducing structural inequalities, norms for assimilation, and exclusionary decision-making processes. This study provides at least preliminary evidence that inclusive climates are beneficial in this regard.

Extensions of This Work

Professor Nishii has conducted a number of follow-up studies to this work. Below are some of the findings that have emerged:

- While differences in engagement survey scores are common when comparing men to women and whites to ethnic minorities, these differences tend to disappear in units/departments with inclusive climates. As a result, members of these units experience higher levels of cohesion and engage in better quality information sharing, thereby outperforming units/departments that lack inclusive climates.

- Across studies, members of all protected identity groups (i.e., gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, LGBT, national origin, and age) report experiencing significantly lower levels of discrimination and harassment and higher levels of belonging and inclusion when they work in units with inclusive climates.

- People with disabilities are more likely to disclose their disability and/or ask for needed accommodations when they work in units with inclusive climates, and are also less likely to experience negative outcomes resulting from disclosure.

- Managers who engage in inclusive leadership behaviors are more effective at creating inclusive climates. In addition, managers who have bought into the strategic benefits of managing diversity and inclusion are more effective at cultivating inclusive climates than managers who see diversity and inclusion initiatives as being necessitated by pressures to comply with legal regulations or simply keep up with practices adopted by peer organizations.
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