



Why Diversity Is an Opportunity

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*Your leadership challenge, says **Stever Robbins**, is to explore cultural differences in your workforce and help the group discover what they suggest about the business.* by Stever Robbins

Q. How should we think about the importance of diversity, and how best to understand and value cultural differences?

A. Diversity, the misunderstood child of the Age of Aquarius and Political Correctness, is an incredibly powerful tool for an organization. Diversity brings thoughts, feelings, and cultural knowledge that benefits decision making, marketing, operations, culture-building, hiring, firing—just about everything a business does. But its true power comes out only when diversity starts at the top and pervades the business. Alas, most businesses score dismally when it comes to understanding and using difference.

In my experience, many diversity programs are really anti-harassment programs. Someone says something offensive about a different race, gender, religion, geographic origin, or sexual orientation. The diversity police jump in and mandate "diversity training." It's a good thing they jump in—inaction sends the wrong message and can bring big lawsuits—but the motivation and the training many times boils down to, "Don't say these things because people get upset." In really enlightened companies, diversity training happens before it's needed, so that first incident can be avoided, too.

Don't get me wrong; diversity training can produce some effect. The true bigots who don't intend to change at least know now which conversations to save for behind closed doors. People who are ignorant but care will be able to change a bit. But don't expect much benefit beyond a decline in harassment.

What is diversity?

Diversity takes many forms. We mostly notice and legislate the visible stuff: people have different skin color, talk with different accents, wear different clothes, have different (dis)abilities, are different ages, have same-sex partners, practice different religions, and use different hands when they write. Most discrimination targets the visible stuff, and many anti-harassment programs help people understand that despite surface differences, deep down all people are worthwhile and valuable.

Surface diversity is what we deal with when we wish to avoid problems. We teach people to value the person within. But it's the diversity within that brings great benefits. Inner diversity includes the Psych 101 stuff—different personality and work styles, brain dominance, etc. More subtly, it includes different thinking styles and different fundamental assumptions about the way the world works.

The invisible diversities of culture, religion, value systems, etc., are where you can reap real business benefit.

It's easy to assume outer diversity signals inner diversity and vice versa. Not necessarily. A professor once remarked within my earshot, "Never again will most of these students be somewhere with such diversity of race and geographic origin.

And never again will they be somewhere with such uniformity of thought and attitude."

Inner diversity gives the biggest bang for your buck. Personality and behavior style profiles are widely used to help groups identify and talk about inner differences. Not only can the distinctions help explain why people clash, but used in team building, they can help you balance the skills needed to finish a project. For example, one profile distinguishes "people people" from those who are task and process oriented. If you were designing a customer service call center, you would involve both profile types so your systems are efficient but also give a good interpersonal experience.

Profiles can also help match people with jobs. Using profiles, some companies discover all top performers share common attributes. With that knowledge, they can do a better job matching. If Myers-Briggs ESTJs make the best salespeople for your organization, your chronically dissatisfied engineer whose profile is ESTJ may become a huge resource if given a chance in sales.

Cultural differences and deep learning

Though personality diversity is valuable for team building and job matching, even different personalities from the same culture will share a common set of cultural assumptions. The invisible diversities of culture, religion, and value systems are where you can reap real business benefit.

Cultural differences are where you discover the most basic assumptions that you've never even questioned. This causes problems; questioning deep assumptions can feel very threatening. So threatening, in fact, that reactions are defensive bordering on violent. But if you can manage the emotion and create a safe space to play "what if," you may find your thinking changes dramatically.

A reader wrote in last month, "Americans work 50 percent more per week than people in my country and take four weeks fewer vacation, yet they don't get more done than we did in my country." America has cultural assumptions about working a lot and measuring it by face time. A foreigner can point out that there's another way. An American company that listens and learns might be able to offer six weeks of vacation and short hours to attract outstanding employees. (And I know of at least one company that has done this.)

The Dalai Lama points out in his book *The Art of Happiness* that Eastern cultures believe in

reincarnation. As such, they approach even daily tasks very differently. So I tried it (believing, that is, not reincarnating). Believing in future lives removes a lot of my daily stress in this one and also gives me a much longer-term time horizon. Suddenly, consuming my grandchildren's oil seems like a bigger deal, because those grandchildren might be me, reincarnated!

A company that explores a reincarnation belief might end up taking a long-term view on their products. Seventh Generation does just that. They produce environmentally friendly household products. Their cultural source isn't reincarnation, however. The name refers to the Iroquois Confederacy practice of considering consequences seven generations out.


Cultural differences can hint at new markets. Gloria Estefan recognized that the American music business is highly English-centric and has built her own business empire in America's Latin and Spanish-speaking populations—populations almost invisible in mainstream media. The wildly popular reality TV show, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," has helped the mainstream world enjoy "gay sensibility," with *USA Today* reporting (March 3, 2004) that sales for products mentioned on the show soar as much as 300 percent.

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Challenging an assumption doesn't automatically point to opportunity, but it's a start. A European colleague proposed hiring me to speak in his country. I asked, "Where should I stay? What are the good areas of town?" He was amused. "A very American question!" he proclaimed. "Have you ever considered a town might have only good areas?" Um, no. I never had. Even before our current fear-filled time, "bad areas of town" were a given. Knowing it's possible prompts me to ask how to make it happen. Is there a business there? I don't know. But an urban planning or civil engineering firm might find a few trips overseas could trigger some great ideas.

Some of the ways to extract diversity's benefits:

- Identify previously overlooked cultural markets.
- Create new products for existing markets.
- Change corporate culture to attract a different employee mix.
- Form relationships and making inroads internationally.
- Get things done in better ways.

"Comfy" diversity programs held for compliance reasons that skirt the real issues waste time and money. Your leadership challenge is to draw out the differences and help the group safely explore what those differences suggest about the business. You might find new opportunity, but either way, it's simply the right thing to do in an increasingly diverse workforce. It helps people feel valued and more worthwhile, and at the end of the day, why do we even have business if not to have more worthwhile, valuable lives? That's *my* underlying assumption, and if it isn't yours, your first diversity assignment is to try it on for size. 

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