

## Diversity: From Social Justice to Business Imperative

### 3 Inclusive Behaviors to Make Diversity Work



For decades the construct of diversity has been studied from about every angle. Research was initially driven by a need for greater diversity in organizations and institutions to ensure fairness and social justice. This continues to be a compelling reason for diversity as individuals in our society need to feel they can pursue happiness and access success regardless of their background, gender, beliefs, ethnicity, race, orientation or handicap.

In addition to social justice, diversity can lead to better decisions and better business results. This is especially true in highly dynamic and changing environments in which previous assumptions, orthodoxies and business models are challenged. It is worth noting that almost every major innovation that changed the course of an industry, or created a world changing capability, like the internet, was generated by people outside established companies and industries.

This is largely because established companies and organizations of all types embrace one way of thinking and operating, often rejecting new ideas and even people that don't fit into an established profile. This lack of diverse thinking ultimately leads to lack of flexibility and slow response to market conditions. From Blockbuster to Zenith, there are endless examples of companies that moved from the top of their industry to the bottom because they did not embrace new ideas and adapt.

**Diversity matters** – it is the right focus in a pluralistic society, and it is necessary for organization success.

*However*, greater diversity without inclusive behaviors will often create more friction and have a measurable drag on bottom and top-line business results. Studies have shown that

greater diversity, or difference, in background and perspectives predictably leads to more abrasion in relationships, teams and in the workplace. Introducing greater diversity without equipping the people and culture with a framework for appreciating and leveraging diversity can have a significant drag on performance.

We have found there are two elements needed to realize the benefits of diversity in the workplace - an expansive definition of diversity and an enlightened culture in which individuals are held accountable for inclusive behaviors.

## 1. Diversity defined

The easiest approach to defining diversity is through measuring the presence of protected groups within an organization. Measuring the presence of people representing difference in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, orientation and handicap is meaningful, and points the level of access and fairness in a culture. However, simply measuring these “externals” is not a complete measure of diversity.

At its core, diversity is difference in thinking, world view and perspective. People from different protected categories may or may not have different ways of thinking and operating. If people do not bring differing perspectives and fresh thinking, there is the probability of group think and a compliant culture that adopts set orthodoxies and does not adapt to changing markets.

At its core, diversity is about elevating our awareness through challenging assumptions and fresh perspectives, ideas and approaches. Diversity of thought is necessary for continuous improvement and reinvention.

A key indicator of real diversity is – *do you have people in your organization who help you think differently and elevate how you approach work?* Your career, and the life of your organization, depend upon you answering this question affirmatively. This means hiring, supporting and even promoting people who think differently than you do.

## 2. The need for complimentary inclusion

Diverse perspectives need to find expression and application. This happens through reinforcing a set of behaviors that make it safe, even beneficial, for anyone to share their best thinking. The culture of inclusion is based upon a set of behaviors that are reinforced by training, performance systems, leadership support, formal recognition and rewards, and company communications. Below is a set of three key leadership behaviors that we have found cut across organizations in creating an inclusive culture. This list can be adjusted and enhanced to fit the unique needs of a team, department or company.

1. *Appreciate the individual* – get beyond stereotypes, and surface and highlight each person's unique characteristics.
2. *Leverage the thinking of diverse groups* – do not prejudge ideas and facilitate exploration of new ideas.
3. *Seek out counter perspectives* – actively look for people to challenge your ideas and elevate your decisions through new perspectives.

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