A Practical Look at the Value of Diversity

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In the exploration of individual behavior in organizational settings, one of the more controversial indicators of change has been the increasing diversity of the workforce. Even the meaning of the term itself is expanding. Diversity goes beyond the common perception of difference in demographics such as ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic stature, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality. There are derivatives of these demographics that spawn into differences in beliefs, attitudes, values, perception, and personality traits. These are important factors that cannot be overlooked by organizations as they become more dependent upon people, their motivations, and how they work together. Diversity is further expressed through individual behavior and outcomes such as work habits, and differences in skills and abilities. Personal characteristics such as dependability, flexibility, and adaptability vary as widely as demographics.

The balance (or imbalance) of these characteristics can make or break a team effort. Even occupation can shape perceptions, values, and beliefs. Consider the friction that can arise within cross-functional teams stemming from different perspectives rooted in role identity (for example, a marketing manager’s focus on a product’s ability to compete vs. an engineering manager’s focus on the elegance of its design).

The promising aspect of this expanding view of diversity is that it increases willingness to consider all types of differences. When dissimilarities in non-demographic traits such as ability, skills, and personality can be considered, leveraged and valued for their contributions to high performance, then appreciation for other differences treated similarly with the same effects. In other words, if organizations can value and benefit from personal diversity, they can learn to do the same with demographic diversity.
Valuing Personal Diversity

Personal diversity is the variation of individual personality, values, aptitude, and ability. Personality is the overall profile or combination of characteristics that capture the unique nature of a person that is reflected in the way they act, react and interact with others. The elaborate diversity of personalities begins with the influence of cultural values, norms, and life situations on personal development. Those three factors have many, many permutations that impact the “Big Five” personality dimensions – extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2003). Every personality develops within the dualities of these five dimensions. We are all somewhere between extraverted and introverted, agreeable and disagreeable, emotionally stable or unstable, and open or closed to what is new. Awareness and consideration of these types of differences, organizationally and individually, informs decisions and plans regarding how people work together. It is obvious, but often taken for granted, how much personality impacts performance.

Values are broad preferences concerning appropriate courses of action or outcomes (O'Toole, 1995). The sources of personal values are most often parents, teachers (oh my!), role models, and external reference groups of which an individual is a member or considers authoritative. Values influence behavior and attitudes, determining how individuals “fit” within an organization which has its own values and attitudes (a culture). For example, for much of today’s workforce, there is a movement away from duty, organizational loyalty, and job-related identity. Over the last few decades, organizational cultures have rewarded duty and loyalty less and less, because such values are long-term in nature and most businesses today focus on the short-term. Rapid change and expectations of immediate results favor the “free agent” employee willing to move with the opportunities. Employees seeking recognition of loyalty and long-term commitment are finding fewer and fewer organizations with the sense of community and belonging that exemplify those values. As a result, a different set of employee values are emerging. Meaningful work, pursuit of leisure, personal
identity, and self-fulfillment are more important. But some will argue that this shift may be why values such as honesty, ethics, and accountability are taking a negative turn.

Aptitude is a person’s capability to learn. Ability is a person’s existing capacity to perform the various tasks needed for a given job (Schermerhorn et al., 2003). A person’s abilities include the relevant knowledge and skills that qualify him or her for a specific role. Aptitude is equally important due to the continuous change and improvement expected in most organizations. Although development of aptitude and ability are less affected by the factors that shape personality, such as parents and teachers, how they are applied can often be linked to the same influences. Aptitude and ability is what we do; personality is how we do it.

Valuing Demographic Diversity

Understanding and valuing personal diversity offers important lessons regarding the value of demographic characteristics. If we can respect and deal with the needs and concerns of people and their personal differences (a credo of our individualistic society), then it follows that we should be able to do the same relative to their demographics differences. The challenge is avoid the generalizations that link demographics to stereotypes.

For example, if we remember that a broad generalization about introverted people is just as hasty and potentially false as a generalization about an entire demography, it is easy to see the errors of our ways. Consider the widespread assumption that demography is not a good indicator of individual fit to a job, but that personality can be. Given equal experience and accomplishments on their resumes, who is more likely to be hired as a field sales representative – a soft-spoken, articulate young Hispanic woman (introverted); a story-telling, hard hand-shaking young white male (extroverted); or an amiable, dignified middle-aged black woman (extroverted/introverted)? Of course, it depends, but the real questions are what does the hiring manager see as the differences and how do they impact his or her decision about who to hire.
Studies have demonstrated that there are no consistent differences between men and women in problem-solving abilities, analytical skills, self-awareness, competitive drive, motivation, learning ability, and sociability (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). Yet men get recognition for their competitive drive and analytical skills, while women are most respected for their relationship management and problem-solving. Similarly older workers are appreciated for lower turnover and fewer absences, yet they are often stereotyped as inflexible with a tendency to complain that their experience and skills are not valued. This certainly wasn’t the case when the dot.coms began to tank. Many of those that survived replaced their twenty-something founders with seasoned “grey hairs” that could apply their years of experience to make them viable.

Gender, racial and ethnic groups are the focus of most diversity initiatives because women, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans make up an ever-increasing percentage of the American workforce. Potential for stereotypes and discrimination has, and continues, to adversely affect career opportunities for these and other groups, such as the disabled, gay, lesbian, newly immigrated. But if we, as organizations, groups, and individuals, accepted these obviously different people for their various personalities, values, abilities and aptitudes, appreciating how their disparate cultures and life experience have shaped their personal attributes, diversity would be far less controversial than we make it.

References: