

Managing diverse views critical to success



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If an organization serves customers face-to-face, it's usually important that the workforce reflects the demographics of its customer base.

This allows customers to "see themselves" within the organization and vice versa, creating a more welcoming and empathetic atmosphere. College recruiting literature typically contains photos portraying a diverse student body. Often, the diversity of the student population and/or instructors doesn't mirror that represented in the recruiting literature.

Even if most employees don't literally shake hands with customers, having a workforce that reflects all the ways that people are different is important.

The most valuable diversity within any organization is difference in thought. We each bring unique life experiences to problems and opportunities based on our age, gender, ethnicity, physical attributes and other variables. This wider pool of life experiences is certain to lead to varying perspectives on situations and, thus, better solutions.

In order to harvest diversity of thought, an organization must be able to manage conflicting viewpoints. This is the essence of synergy.

A starting point is to create an environment where team members see a difference of opinion as an opportunity to embrace rather than a problem to sweep under the rug.

This requires frequent reinforcement by leaders in their communication and consistent behaviors on their part when facilitating team disagreements. More importantly, it means demonstrating those same behaviors when leaders are at differences with their peers.

Ground rules for healthy debate can be helpful, posted within areas where debate is most likely to occur. Examples might include:

- We debate the issue, not the person.
- Listen and paraphrase the other's points before sharing yours.

Invariably, instances will require skillful facilitation in order to resolve differences. In such situations, start out by reminding everyone that we are all wearing the same team's jersey and want what's best

for the team. Our situation is akin to chefs collaborating for the best recipe, not competing chefs on a reality show. Remind everyone of our ground rules.

Start by listing the points of agreement. This gives us something to build upon. Often this process illustrates that we agree on a lot more than initially was evident.

Be clear on the specific point of disagreement. "So, we disagree on the best way to ..." Occasionally this step will reveal that the two solutions are addressing different problems.

Asking participants to identify the merits of the other's idea or the drawbacks of theirs can be fruitful with mature teams comfortable dealing with conflict. These can be listed in a simple pro/con table.

Rare is the situation where competing ideas are mutually exclusive. Often, participants can be challenged to develop a third scenario to realize the benefits and/or minimize the downsides of both of the initial concepts.

Are there points of varying opinions that can be clarified with data? If so, challenge participants to identify them and agree on a data collection and analysis plan.

In situations of strong disagreement or where making the best decision is vitally important, the use of a detailed and objective tool, such as the Kepner-Tregoe decision making methodology, might be necessary.

In extreme situations, where no progress is being made, it might be necessary to simply call a "time-out." The space provided hopefully allows emotions to diffuse and gives the facilitator time to explore other options for moving forward.

When common ground is reached, it's important to recognize that accomplishment, especially when the end product is better than the inputs that were brought into the debate. Even when the decision reached closely resembles one of the arguments, there should be no "winner" and "loser" but rather participants whose ideas were heard and considered.

Recognizing the desired behaviors and celebrating the synergistic solution primes the pump for the next healthy debate.

RICK SAYS

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