





MAKING THE MOST OF DIVERSITY

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There is enough research on how diversity – of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and more – can foster innovation and creativity within companies. In order to tap this, organizations need to move from simply recognizing differences to making the most of individual perspectives and ways of thinking.

In 1967, Neisser came up with a complex term called “cognitive psychology” to describe the understanding of something seemingly simple – how people think.

Neisser described cognition as that involving “all processes by which the sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used. It is concerned with these processes even when they operate in the absence of relevant stimulation, as in images and hallucinations...”

So, can thinking really be distilled down to a clinical definition? Not entirely. Thinking varies from individual to individual, shaped by the way they interact with their worlds through their experiences. This is what produces diversity of thought, which in turn leads to diversity of perspectives, leading to diversity in the ways that issues are understood and addressed.

The value that diversity and inclusion bring to business is well established. There is enough research on how diversity – of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, geography, education, experience, physical ability and more – can lead to enhanced creativity and organizational performance.

Organizations across the spectrum have adopted strategies to make their workforce diverse. However, in the face of daily business challenges, we often get trapped in standard ways of doing things and fall back

on established systems and processes to approach issues. While this may deliver enhanced control and predictability in the short term, it leaves us exposed to groupthink – to the propagation of standard thought processes and similar ideas. Such an atmosphere can stifle creativity and hinder new ways of looking at issues. Groupthink may also keep us from recognizing and preparing for impending challenges, with catastrophic results.

Sallie Krawcheck, the former president of Bank of America's Global Wealth Management division, attributed the 2008 financial collapse to groupthink. When professionals with similar backgrounds who are conditioned to think in a certain way were thrown together, they failed to spot or acknowledge all the signs of a banking system on the verge of collapse.

Diversity of thought is essential when we are working in an environment marked by new dynamics, fresh challenges and constant change. Each one of us, by virtue of our background, upbringing and experiences, can bring a unique understanding of a complex situation to the table.

Sometimes, we facilitate diversity of thought without explicitly calling it out. Look at how popular the concept of "crowdsourcing" has become. Today, crowdsourcing is commonly used in inviting citizens' or experts' solutions for pressing civic problems, public policy or technological advancements. Many of these platforms are complemented by social collaboration tools to facilitate engagement and interaction.

We have also seen the concept of "design thinking" rising in popularity. Design thinking is about taking a creative, yet solution-oriented approach to problem solving by considering both known and unknown parameters of the problem. This is different from the traditional method of problem-solving, which is more structured, systematic and process-bound. Design thinking draws its uniqueness from being exploratory and iterative, and being open to even redefining the problem itself.

Several organizations are beginning to take proactive steps to build a diverse talent pool with the hope of creating greater shared value for the organization and the community. Many companies have established policies for hiring employees with disabilities. DLF, Jaypee and Infosys proactively hire military personnel into their workforce. GMR and Eureka Forbes actively recruit from rural areas to hone their sales and administrative capabilities. Organizations like Scope International, Amway and Kotak Life Insurance work with homemakers to tap their skills and professional commitment within more flexible working arrangements. Punj Lloyd and ICICI Prudential actively induct senior citizens into their workforce.

However, at this point, we need to take a step back and critically reflect on how the lifecycle of facilitating diversity of thought in organizations can be managed for optimal benefits. The above examples still seem to address diversity at the surface level. But we need to dive deeper to explore how different cognitive abilities resting with different talent pools can be leveraged and applied.

A recent study by Deloitte on the subject talks about hiring, managing and promoting strategies to encourage diversity of thought in the workplace. Hiring for diversity needs to move beyond compliance and visible tick boxes. Organizations have to introduce cognitive assessments to gauge the extent to which divergent thought processes are being used in various business situations. Managing for diversity means

going beyond regular consensus-seeking approaches to those that encourage task-focused conflict and help to unleash creativity. Promoting for diversity entails recognizing that there are different approaches to problem-solving and instituting team-based performance frameworks that foster a culture of inclusion and collaboration.

To quote from the same Deloitte study: “Each human being has a unique blend of identities, cultures, and experiences that inform how he or she thinks, interprets, negotiates, and accomplishes a task. Diversity of thought goes beyond the affirmation of equality—simply recognizing differences and responding to them. Instead, the focus is on realizing the full potential of people, and in turn the organization, by acknowledging and appreciating the potential promise of each person’s unique perspective.”

To enable organizations to steer through the complexities of the current day environment, recognizing and providing for diversity of thought through our human capital is essential. The onus for this clearly lies with our business leaders.

Going back to Neisser, the proposition of cognitive psychology has considerable significance on how we choose to manage our organizations by recognizing that every individual is unique in the way they interpret and make sense of the world around them.

What is interesting here is that cognition or information processing exists even in the absence of relevant stimuli. In today’s environment where there is a high level of overlap between work and personal lives, it is probable that individuals are constantly interpreting information and forming perspectives consciously or unconsciously, with or without stimuli. Organizations need to find ways to take advantage of the diversity and richness that people can contribute, just by virtue of being the individuals they are.



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