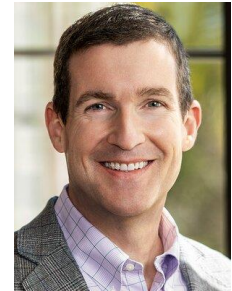


Lead Like 'Ted Lasso' By Embracing Cognitive Diversity

By **Paul Manuele** (July 23, 2024)

Recent discussions about cognitive diversity have highlighted its importance for team performance and innovation. As HR Magazine reports, promoting cognitive diversity can significantly boost organizational success.[1]

This principle is wonderfully illustrated in the popular Apple TV+ series "Ted Lasso," which may soon see a fourth season or spinoff, according to recent hints from TV executives.[2]



Paul Manuele

The other night, while rewatching an episode of "Ted Lasso,"[3] I was struck by a scene in which Coach Lasso's heartfelt and human approach to leadership proved to be inspiring and transformative.

Lasso is delivering a pep talk after a rough period for the team when a "Believe" sign above his head falls apart. Lasso takes down the sign and rips it up, saying, "Belief doesn't just happen because you hang something up on a wall. All right? It comes from in here," he says, pointing to his heart. "You know? And up here," he continues, pointing to his head, and, indicating his stomach, "down here."

He encourages the team to believe in themselves and one another in all their diversity, from the confident and flashy Jamie Tartt, to the steady and reliable Sam Obisanya, and the enthusiastic and quirky Dani Rojas.

Lasso's approach to leadership is all about bringing together a diverse group of people, each with their own quirks and strengths, and finding a way to make them work as a cohesive unit. It got me thinking: We could use a bit of Ted Lasso magic in our own lives, especially in law firms.

Just as Lasso faces the challenge of uniting his players, we're all dealing with intense polarization these days. It's everywhere — from politics to social media, the dinner table and our workplaces. This divide can be frustrating, but it also highlights the incredible value of diverse perspectives.

In reflecting on how Lasso navigates these challenges, I realized how important it is for us to embrace cognitive diversity — the different ways we think, solve problems and make decisions.

Law firms have been making significant efforts to embrace diversity, particularly when it comes to attributes that tend to be more visible, like race, gender and ethnicity. These efforts are crucial not only for fostering fairness and creating an inclusive environment, but also for enhancing performance and innovation.

These more visible forms of diversity bring a variety of perspectives and ideas, leading to better problem-solving and decision making. Tucked within this kind of diversity is the idea of cognitive diversity — different ways of thinking, problem-solving approaches and decision-making styles.

While visible diversity is essential, we also need to dig deeper and recognize that cognitive

diversity is a key component of a dynamic and effective team.

It's not just about having different backgrounds and appearances; it's also about the rich tapestry of thoughts and ideas that these diverse backgrounds bring. By understanding and valuing cognitive diversity, we can truly unlock the full potential of our teams.

Why Diverse Thinking Matters

Let's face it: Having a bunch of people who think the same way is probably not the best strategy for solving wide-ranging, complex and ever-evolving problems. Diverse thinking is crucial for challenging biases and making better decisions.

Studies show that teams with a mix of cognitive styles are more innovative and effective at solving complex problems. For instance, research highlighted in a 2017 Harvard Business Review article found that cognitively diverse teams solve problems faster and are more innovative than homogeneous teams.[4]

When you bring together people with different approaches, you're more likely to avoid the pitfalls of groupthink and make smarter, more balanced decisions.

As noted in the Harvard Business Review article, there is a common tendency for organizations to recruit and promote individuals who resemble the existing team, a phenomenon often summarized as "recruit[ing] in our own image."

"This bias," the authors write, extends beyond "demographic distinctions like race or gender," influencing the way "colleagues gravitate toward the people who think and express themselves" similarly.

And, "[a]s a result, organizations often end up with like-minded teams." This phenomenon, known as functional bias, leads to low cognitive diversity, and limits a team's ability to approach challenges from multiple angles and innovate effectively.[5]

Mixing It Up in Law Firms

So, what does this look like in a law firm? It's about having a mix of people who bring different strengths to the table, such as:

- Risk-takers, who drive growth and innovation by embracing opportunities and navigating uncertainties with confidence;
- Cautious planners, who provide necessary caution, foreseeing potential issues and offering critical evaluations to prevent costly mistakes;
- Analytical minds, who bring rigorous evaluation and data-driven decision making to the table;
- Creative souls, who innovate and come up with out-of-the-box solutions that can differentiate the firm within the market;
- Strategic thinkers, who ensure projects are sustainable and aligned with the firm's overarching goals;

- Implementers, who translate strategic plans into concrete actions, which are crucial for the realization of goals and objectives;
- Collaborative team players, who excel at fostering teamwork and ensuring that different perspectives are integrated effectively; and
- Independent workers, who thrive on working autonomously, providing focused, deep work that drives forward the individual aspects of projects.

Finding Balance

A law firm thrives when it balances these diverse traits. Here are a few areas where this balance is crucial.

Launching New Practice Areas

Risk-takers drive exploration and innovation in new practice areas, while cautious planners ensure these ventures are strategically sound and sustainable.

Handling Client Feedback

Analytical minds ensure responses are data-driven and evidence-based, while creative souls provide innovative solutions that address client concerns in unique ways.

Crisis Management

Immediate action by implementers can sometimes be necessary to shape the public narrative and assert control. However, carefully considered inaction advised by strategic thinkers can prevent unnecessary escalation and allow issues to be resolved quietly.

Creating an Inclusive Culture

Building a diverse and inclusive leadership culture starts with structural changes. According to a 2022 Forbes article,^[6] fostering cognitive diversity involves implementing strategies that encourage a variety of thinking styles and perspectives.

The article suggests four basic strategies for getting started, including setting clear goals, strengthening social networks, facilitating discussion and embracing conflict — all excellent advice.

In addition to this, law firms might consider some additional strategies, including those outlined below.

Administering Cognitive Diversity Assessments

Utilize tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument and the Big Five personality traits to map the cognitive landscape of teams.

These assessments should not merely serve as team-building activities, but also as instruments for strategic team enhancement.

By systematically analyzing the results, law firms can make informed decisions about team

composition and dynamics, ensuring through their recruiting and professional development programs a balanced mix of skills and perspectives that maximize collective problem-solving capabilities.

Implementing Multidisciplinary Projects

Multidisciplinary projects can be highly effective in fostering cognitive diversity. Forming teams from various departments — such as human resources, marketing, accounting and information technology — to tackle firm initiatives can drive innovation and enhance mutual understanding and collaboration.

Conducting Structured Ideation Sessions

Structured ideation sessions can drive innovation in areas such as operational efficiency, client service and marketing.

Considering the heavy workloads typical in law firms, begin with operational efficiency projects to streamline processes and reduce overall work demands.

These sessions should start with detailed preparations and include a stage where participants independently write down their ideas, promoting equal participation from all.

The ideas can then be collectively refined and developed into actionable plans, fostering a collaborative culture that values diverse contributions.

Overcoming Challenges

It's essential to remember that while racial, ethnic and gender diversity often brings a variety of perspectives, achieving true cognitive diversity requires deliberate effort.

There's resistance to change, as well as the challenge of identifying and measuring cognitive diversity. We must consciously embrace and cultivate diverse ways of thinking within our teams.

Together, the strategies described above provide a holistic approach to enhancing cognitive diversity and fostering innovation within organizations, particularly in settings like law firms where traditional structures can benefit significantly from fresh, diverse perspectives and collaborative problem-solving.

A Lesson From "Ted Lasso"

In the end, just as Lasso finds strength in his team's differences, we, too, can find strength in ours. After Lasso tore up the "Believe" sign, the team was initially shaken, but this act became a catalyst for deeper introspection and unity.

The players started to rediscover and appreciate each other's unique contributions, leading to improved teamwork and success on the field. This transformation highlighted how embracing diverse perspectives can turn challenges into opportunities.

Law firms can similarly harness cognitive diversity to foster innovation and resilience to better navigate the complexities of today's world. It's about recognizing that we're stronger together, even when we don't see eye to eye.

So, let's take a cue from Ted Lasso, and work together to achieve better outcomes for our firms and our society.

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[1] Cise Kilic. "Promote cognitive diversity to boost performance," HR magazine, June 5, 2024.

[2] Ryan Christoffel. "Ted Lasso season 4, series spinoff hinted at by TV exec," 9to5 Mac, Jun 11, 2024. <https://9to5mac.com/2024/06/11/ted-lasso-season-4-spin-off-hinted-at-by-tv-exec/#:~:text=Ted%20Lasso%20Season%204%20or,in%20the%20Ted%20Lasso%20universe.>

[3] "Signs." Season 3, Episode 5.

[4] Alison Reynolds and David Lewis. "Teams Solve Problems Faster When They're More Cognitively Diverse," Harvard Business Review, March 30, 2017.

[5] Reynolds and Lewis, March 30, 2017.

[6] Irma Becerra. "How To Capitalize On Cognitive Diversity By Building Your Team's Integrative Capacity," Forbes Business Council, July 18, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/07/18/how-to-capitalize-on-cognitive-diversity-by-building-your-teams-integrative-capacity/>.