

Cultivating Common Ground: Key to Innovation

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No one would deny that diversity and inclusion is a journey. Some, however, would disagree on just what route that journey should take. Certainly, at the very least, it is from inequity to fairness, from inequality to equality, from injustice to justice.

The journey does, I'd argue, take another route as well. That is, from an "us and them" to an "US" mentality. This amounts to beginning to focus, not only on how we differ, but also on what we have in common. Of course, we must continue to value diversity – without diverse opinions and life-experiences, any true innovation will be lost.

At the same time, however, we must also focus on the Common Ground we share. This may seem a bit awkward – something like the childhood trick of simultaneously rubbing your stomach in one direction and your head another – but, like those challenging gestures, the two are not incompatible.

Why Is Identifying Common Ground a Good Idea?

Much has been written about the value of diverse personalities, thinking styles, and demographic groups in the workplace. Less attention has been paid to the benefits that accrue when those diverse people work to identify and focus on what they have in common. Teams that are aware of what they share are, you see, quite simply more successful. Why?

First, teams that share an awareness of commonality, experience increased trust among themselves. This trust, in turn, means that individuals more readily voice their ideas to other members of the group and, equally important, are more willing to share bits and pieces of information that can lead to the success of a project (Gruenfeld, Williams, Mannix, and Neale, "Group Composition and Decision Making," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 1996).

Second, those teams that can identify common values have been shown to feel increased work satisfaction and, in turn, commitment to the task. Again, this does not mean that they agree on everything or share the same background – merely that there is an awareness of some degree of looking at the world in the same way. (Neale, Jehn, Northcraft, "Why Differences Make a Difference," Sage Publications, 1999).

Finally, there's empathy. Empathy is the capacity to relate to another person's feelings. Empathy is key to the ability to have productive conversation, listen to another's views, and support others in times of stress. As it turns out, the more similar we feel we are toward another person, the more quickly we are able to empathize with them.

How Can We Identify Common Ground?

Do you remember the last time you decided to buy a new car? Did you notice something odd that happened after you decided what make, model, and color you were after? That's right, you started noticing that particular kind of car everywhere.

This phenomenon is called "saliency determination" – it means that we notice what we care about. When we care and are excited about the imminent purchase of that nice black shiny SUV, our mind almost magically seeks out examples to the point that you can spot one cruising three lanes away and a couple of hundred feet in front of you.

This same principle applies to noticing what we have in common with people. As we begin to see the value in identifying what we share, we will – as with that new car – care more about it. When we care more it, we will automatically begin to notice our commonalities and gradually see the benefits of balancing both valuing diversity and identifying Common Ground.

Next Steps

It's time that organizations, and individuals, begin to add the cultivating of Common Ground to their diversity toolbox. This means to bring team members of diverse backgrounds together on projects that share common goals – these might be workplace tasks or volunteer efforts that share a common purpose.

Affinity groups are another way to surface shared values. In addition to ERG's that focus on ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation, why not follow the lead of those organizations that have founded groups that focus on life challenges (for example, elder care or the challenges of adopting a child), life situations (vets, part-time workers), or values (interfaith networks)? Volunteer efforts, too, bring people who are in some way different from each other together around a shared cause or value.

Above all else, though, let's start talking about what we have in common and calling attention to our shared desire to succeed, to love our families, to treasure music, to feel good physically – whatever it might be. Just as difference and commonality live side by side in the same person and same relationship, valuing diversity can peacefully co-exist with noticing the Common Ground beneath our feet.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on workplace diversity, bias-reduction, and cross-cultural issues. She is the author of five books including the one on which this article is based: *The Diversity and Inclusion Handbook* published by The Walk the Talk Company.

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