

Chapter 10

Lucky #8 - Diversity

By: Vic Pepe

Let me start by saying that I won't be baited by anyone into a political conversation about diversity. **Fact:** diversity AND talent bring about the best ideas. Period...

Diversity plays a major role in achieving success for a variety of reasons. I'm not referring exclusively to the current political climate surrounding race, language, and gender diversity but also to the deeper concepts of understanding and gaining diverse perspectives from your team in any situation and, perhaps most important, better serving clients of

varying backgrounds. In this context, I'm also referring to embracing a broad range of skills and experiences as part of a successful career path.

Diversity differs and continually morphs regardless of where your career takes you. With this in mind, adopting a diverse mindset absolutely requires sincerity and the ability to let go of personal biases in the quest for objectivity. Wholly embracing diversity is the only way to ensure that you, as a leader, remain open to different opinions, perspectives, and ideas while promoting the harmony necessary for superior teamwork among your staff.

Growing up in the melting pot of Brooklyn, New York, I was exposed to various races,

religions, ethnicities, personalities, etc., and quite honestly didn't hear the word "diversity" until well into my 30s. My immediate family came from diverse religious backgrounds, and New York arguably consists of more diverse cultures and people than anywhere else on Earth. As a kid in the 1970s, I recall meeting a Holocaust survivor. She had the tattoo on her arm to prove it. I considered that normal for my childhood growing up in a culture defined by its diverse inhabitants. Being exposed to many different people virtually every day proved a powerful advantage later in life. Not only do I have no problem working with people from remarkably different backgrounds, but I also thrive on it.

Diversity surrounded me to the point that I didn't realize it existed as an issue - and often a major obstacle - until being exposed to it in the corporate world. It became a challenge to adjust to others' lack of exposure to diversity in the early stages of my career.

Unfortunately, those who lack exposure to diversity in their formative years can quickly grow immune to -- and often discourage -- the undeniable benefits of embracing diversity in their business culture.

This is a colossal mistake on a multitude of levels.

Diversity, at times, has shifted to an agenda seeking to fill quotas or appeasing an agenda outside the company strategy. It's done insincerely. I know that in the world we live in,

the fact remains that these quotas are a major driver. It covers the ass of corporations - or so they believe.

At its core, diversity provides creativity through a range of experiences and, when implemented, thinking without restrictions from infinite angles and points of view. In a leadership role, a *genuine appreciation* of diverse perspectives from diverse backgrounds must be achieved to succeed at the highest levels.

Much of my success comes from consciously and conscientiously building diverse teams to access as many viewpoints as possible. To be clear: I want various views regardless of skin color, personal beliefs, gender, sexual preference, or any other trait not identical to mine. As Coach

Tony said to me once, "When the day skin color is as easy or as insignificant a conversation as eye color, then we'll know we've made it."

When my teams understand and genuinely appreciate diversity and diverse perspectives, there's invariably team-wide buy-in and more enthusiastic participation in achieving the organization's goals.

As a leader, you should routinely take a good, hard look at your audience. If I'm catering to a younger crowd, having a younger person on the team might make perfect sense. To best understand the thinking of millennials, I can only benefit from hiring millennials for certain aspects of a project.

Requirements continually morph, so in any given situation, my project goals and organizational goals are best served by changing to align with the desired outcome. It's not about quotas, political correctness, or even covering your ass against a potential lawsuit - it's about having people close to the communities you want to reach and serve, as well as learning their perspectives for your long-term personal and professional growth.

Granted, bringing together people of different backgrounds can create challenges, even major problems. One way to alleviate diversity-related issues is to seek individuals with a range of experience and demonstrable respect for others. If you hire someone with a

diverse background who lacks respect for others, shows no interest in working with others or learning from their experiences, or fails to appreciate how their diversity benefits the team, it may be best to cut them loose. Bottom line: find the best person for the job to build the best teams who can work in harmony with each other because of their diversity, not despite it.

Again, because of my early, prolonged exposure to diversity, I've always been able to communicate effectively with people from virtually all backgrounds. Successful leaders should strive to emulate this, especially if raised in more monochrome environments. The more you succeed, the more people you will encounter along

the way, inevitably requiring different modes of communication with countless varieties of people.

Diversity is relatively easy. It does not require tests and personality profiles. It should be natural when you commit to recruiting the best and doing the best. Ultimately, it would be best to have as many minds with as many different perspectives on your team as possible to ensure innovation and higher success rates.

The only way to thoroughly understand and reap the benefits of diversity, and the only way to better serve clients from varying walks of life, is to embrace diversity without restrictions.

Ok... I can't wrap the chapter without an epic story about a lack of diversity - maybe just plain ignorance. I will leave all the real names out, though I am dying to let you know to whom this happened. We still laugh about it today - because we can...

It was a Thursday afternoon, and a guy who worked with me (let's call him John) was talking to me about a project in my office. In comes a guy who worked for me (let's call him Jim) and, at the time, was commuting from another state. Jim came in to say, 'See you Monday; I am headed home for the weekend.'

Jim was going through a very tough divorce at the time. I could see it on his face. I said to him, "Hey man, you ok?"

I can see you're struggling. Let me know if I can help you in any way." Jim replied, "Thanks - I'll be fine. It's just that my wife is taking me to the cleaners. She's trying to JEW me out of every penny I have."

I immediately start laughing. Knee-slapping belly laughing. Don't get me wrong, his comment sucked, and I didn't think it was funny at all - but John in my office was like a super-jew, and for me... Well, my grandfather's name was Morris Levy. Figure the rest out on your own. Jim was perplexed by my laughter, and after about 8-10 seconds, he realized that John was Jewish. Still, to this day, Jim doesn't know that Vic Pepe is an actual/legitimate member of the tribe.

Then things got very weird. I started laughing even harder when he realized. Just purely at his ignorance and the fact that John wanted to punch him in the face, but hey, we were in the office - you can't do that.

Jim immediately apologized. We think he really meant it. Jim wasn't a bad guy—just a moron who grew up in a bubble and had zero exposure to diversity. After I stopped laughing and Jim tucked his tail between his legs, he left for the weekend. John and I said, "What a poor bastard." He grew up in a fucking bubble, has zero diversity experience, and will never climb the corporate ranks. On top of that, his lack of exposure has produced ignorance. It turned out to be precisely accurate long term.

What's the moral of the story? If you grew up lacking access to true diversity, seek it out. You'll be limited in life, opportunities, experiences, and a hell of a lot of great people and talent without it.

PS - It's not that hard to find!