

Professional Resources

Article

Why 'Thought Diversity' Is The Future Of The Workplace

Alison Griswold Sep. 27, 2013,

The future of workplace diversity is here, and it's not what you think. In fact, it's how you think.

While we've long known that gender, race, and cultural diversity create better organizations, the newest workplace frontier is all about our minds. According to a recent study by consulting and professional services company Deloitte, cultivating "diversity of thought" at your business can boost innovation and creative problem-solving.

People bring different cultures, backgrounds, and personalities to the table — and those differences shape how they think. Some people are analytical thinkers, while others thrive in creative zones. Some are meticulous planners, and others love spontaneity. By mixing up the types of thinkers in the workplace, Deloitte believes companies can stimulate creativity, spur insight, and increase efficiency.

Varying the types of thinkers in a company also helps guard against "groupthink," a dangerous tendency in groups to focus first and foremost on group conformity, often at the expense of making good decisions. "A lot of organizations drive toward consensus, but we're trying to say, 'hey, that's not the best way of doing things,'" says Nes Diaz-Uda, senior consultant at Deloitte Consulting LLP and one of the study's authors. Diversity of thought, or "thought diversity" is still an emerging field, but the authors expect it to grow, since new neurological technologies that assess how people think are beginning to hit the marketplace. In the meantime, here are five simple steps the folks at Deloitte suggest managers can take to increase the thought diversity in their companies:

Hire the unconventional candidate.

You've just interviewed three candidates; let's call them Jeff, Rose, and Spencer. When you asked all three the same 10 questions, Jeff answered seven right, Rose six, and Spencer only five. Naturally, you're inclined to hire Jeff and Rose. But then you notice that Spencer answered correctly all the questions that your two other candidates missed. In his book "The Difference," University of Michigan economist Scott Page uses precisely this scenario to illustrate how managers could vary their practices to hire for more thought diversity. Page found that most companies would have hired Jeff and Rose — the two candidates with the highest scores. But the smarter move might be to higher Spencer, Page says, because he was able to answer questions the other two missed, suggesting he brings a different way of thinking to the table.

Know your team, and leverage their unique talents.

The first step any manager should take, says Deloitte specialist leader Carmen Medina, is to assess the team. Who's a creative thinker?



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Building bridges of understanding and common interest among members

Mathematically inclined? Good with words? Strong managers know which particular skills their employees have, and use that knowledge to assign work that plays to specific employee's strengths. Having a staff of employees who each contribute in unique ways and maximizing the value of their individual talents will bolster the company as a whole.

Rephrase your questions to encourage honest feedback.

A common question for a boss to ask his team at the end of a presentation is: "What do you think?" Well, this question is a death knell for thought diversity. It's broad, vague, and often leaves the listeners wondering what, exactly, their boss wants to hear.

Instead, it's important for managers to ask clear, specific questions that are designed to elicit constructive criticism and diverse opinions. Rather than asking employees what they think, for example, Medina says a manager could ask something like, "What part of my proposal did you like the least?"

Encourage "reverse mentoring" on your team to get a mix of perspectives.

With new technology constantly rolling out, it's increasingly common to see younger workers teaching older ones how to use the new tools. This process of "reverse mentoring" helps younger employees feel like their ideas are valued and provides a fresh perspective for more established office members. Managers can help encourage reverse mentorship among their teams, or company leaders can put a formal program in place like networking and communications manufacturer Cisco Systems did.

Create a culture that is open to new ideas, and start with yourself.

Thought diversity is about how people think, and that's a reflection of who they are. If your employees don't feel comfortable being themselves in the office, then their varied ideas and ways of thinking won't come to the fore. It's important for managers not to stifle conversations or be close-minded to suggestions, even on their own ideas.

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