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OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Why you must harness the flexibility of a diverse skills pool. By **OMAR ZEIN**

In our increasingly heterogeneous world where diversity – rather than similarity – is the norm for many organisations and groups, understanding the nature and significance of diversity has never been so important as today. For while diversity presents an opportunity, a lack of awareness and understanding can mean it is not exploited effectively.

But what is diversity? What are its benefits? And how can we harness them? It is only when persons from different backgrounds come together in a specific environment that ‘diversity’ is formed.

Indeed, diversity is defined in terms of its environment: a diverse environment is one whose members bring a multitude of backgrounds and practices.

‘Backgrounds’ can refer to race, ideology, occupation, gender, sexuality, generation, physical ability, education, socio-economic status and so on. ‘Practices’ are working practices influenced by these backgrounds, such as competitiveness, collectiveness, entrepreneurship, hierarchy and risk aversion. Both backgrounds and practices must be managed in order to reap the benefits of diversity.

Diverse backgrounds imply diverse needs among individuals in a team. On the other hand, diverse practices also mean a wide pool of skills and capabilities. This can be of particular value when facing continued change and increased uncertainty.

HOMOGENEITY

A good way to illustrate the benefits of diversity is to start with its opposite: homogeneity. Members of a homogeneous group share similar skills and capabilities that grow out of common experiences, such as education, events and circumstances. This often makes a homogeneous group – or culture – more skilled in one particular industry than others. Further, a homogeneous group has established forms of communication among its members, and finds it easier to share ideas and concepts among itself than with members of other groups or cultures.

On the other hand, the more diverse a group is, the less homogeneous the skills and capabilities of its members, due to their varying experiences. The group will also lack the established forms of communication of its homogeneous counterpart, requiring its members to invest extra efforts in elaborating concepts and ideas with their colleagues.

While, at first, it may seem that this view of diversity is negative, it is actually the opposite. There are two major areas in which a diverse group differs from a homogenous one: its skills pool and communication. It is true that, the wider



the skills pool, the less focused the team's capabilities towards specific outputs. However, a wider pool of skills provides exactly what is needed to support projects when environments, markets and technologies are continually changing. When projects need to be adaptable, diversity can be the key to success.

As for communication, there is no doubt that the process is slower in a diverse team – but that's not a bad thing. Extremes can be harmful, such as overemphasising the value of faster communication, which may lead to compromised decisions and actions. This is a hallmark of some Western cultures.

The past few decades have been littered with catastrophic business decisions from which societies are still to recover. There is no doubt that, in the face of fierce global competition, agility in decision-making is a virtue, but this should not come at the price of drastically compromising decision-making quality. Even when it comes to making non-critical decisions, bad decisions will result in waste. Consider the remarkable success of the 'Asian Dragon' economies; their cultures actively invest time in sharing and reflection prior to making decisions.

In other words, it is time to slow down. Here, diversity comes to the fore, thanks to its inherent requirement that people invest more time in elaborating and explaining their perspectives to colleagues who do not share their background. The result is more reflection. This leads to a wider perspective, and better understanding of variables and risks. The result is better decisions overall.

To harness the benefits of diversity, one must be culturally competent, and understand how a person's preferences and inclinations, arising from their background, can influence their working practices.

There are numerous studies by social psychologists that identify sets of preferences that social groups – such as national or regional cultures – have developed over the generations.

These studies are meant to compare cultures in terms of preferences – for example, Middle Eastern cultures value hierarchy more than Western and Northern European cultures – and provide indications of what to expect when two groups from different cultures work together.

This comparison is not applicable to managing diversity, since diversity is not a defined culture, but rather a mix of varying backgrounds, including, but not exclusive to, cultures. What is useful to us are the 'sets of preferences' that social psychologists have identified, as they will help us understand our colleagues' preferences in diverse environments. These are often referred to as 'value orientation'.

SEQUENTIAL v SYNCHRONIC

Take, for example, the value orientation 'sequential versus synchronic time', which is notable in project planning. Those who are more sequentially-oriented prefer to pre-plan details and finish one task before starting the next. Those more synchronically inclined choose to address multiple tasks simultaneously, without pre-planning the details. In our methodologies,

A WIDER POOL OF SKILLS PROVIDES WHAT IS NEEDED TO SUPPORT PROJECTS WHEN ENVIRONMENTS ARE CONTINUALLY CHANGING

we often associate such practices with a waterfall or agile approach. The fact is that most people naturally perform better under one approach or the other, based on their orientation; diversity provides a choice.

Another value orientation is 'delivery versus content', in which delivery-oriented individuals are more focused on achieving identifiable outputs and enjoy competitive environments, while content-oriented individuals tend to focus more on technical evolution and are less competitive. In extreme cases, being overly delivery-oriented risks compromising quality, while being overly content-oriented can risk delays. Again, diversity provides a choice.

As you begin to understand the various orientations and how they influence working practices, you acquire a tool to navigate diversity. You can also learn how to use it.

MANAGING DIVERSITY

- Understand your own preferences and orientations.
- Don't rely on assumptions.
- Be observant and understanding of colleagues' abilities.
- Engage in open and honest dialogue.
- Exploit the skills pool at your disposal.

First, you need to be aware of your own preferences and orientations. This helps identify your natural strengths and weaknesses, but also reduces the inherent subjectivity we all have when we try to understand others, as we naturally do by comparing them to our own standards. For example, a highly synchronic individual may consider others in their team overly detailed and inflexible in their planning, when they are not, and it is they themselves that would benefit from adding a 'sequential' element to their approach. Others seemed overly detailed and inflexible, but only by comparison to themselves.

Becoming aware of one's orientations will reduce subjectivity when observing others, and counter assumptions you might have made. The next step is to be more observant and understanding of your colleagues' natural abilities, and how such abilities are best employed. It is important to actively engage your colleagues in such efforts through open dialogue. This is beneficial to the project, and the professional development and motivation of its team members.

It's also important to remember that, other than in extreme cases, orientations are not in themselves negative or positive. Rather, it is the overall context that determines which orientation is best. For example, quality control may benefit from higher risk aversion – while the opposite is true for research and development.

Diversity opens up an opportunity. A culturally aware and proficient project professional can take advantage of the level of reflection and reduced speed of decision-making in a diverse group – and harness the flexibility of the diverse skills pool for better implementation of the project. ■



OMAR ZEIN
is a management consultant and author of *Culture and Project Management*