

# Diversity Leadership Guide

## Teamwork and Diversity

In today's world, teamwork and diversity go hand in hand. No matter what the makeup of a team, it can be said that any team is a collection of diverse individuals. In today's workplace, this is more true than ever.

### Capitalizing on Team Diversity

Diversity can be one of your team's greatest assets. Most modern organizations today employ individuals from many backgrounds, walks of life, and countries around the world. If the team members take a moment to observe their workplace or the makeup of the team, they will find people who are different in many ways. Some will come from different ethnic, cultural, educational, and experiential backgrounds. Others will have different personalities or styles, and others will differ in gender, age, religion, lifestyle and so on. The team will probably have both married and single team members and those with and without children. There will also be different feelings and thoughts about work and the workplace. In addition, there are certainly differences in work experience and seniority in the organization. Even if your team is not particularly diverse, it will likely serve a diverse organization and a diverse customer base.

When people bring a variety of work and life experiences, viewpoints, and talents to your team, there are more opportunities for quality decision making. Most decisions made today must take into account a variety of issues, such as customers and their needs, the benefits and limits of technology, gaining support from various people or groups who will be affected by the decision, and frequently complex and confusing alternatives. Having multiple perspectives may slow the discussion down from time to time, but will usually lead to a better quality decision.

As technology mechanizes us and diversity confounds us, there is a growing need for communication and understanding as well as the willingness to help out one another. The cubbyhole nature of large organizations created places where people holed up and worked individually. Today, these cubbyholes are being broken down as people are forced to come together more often to solve problems and to accomplish daily work tasks. Through teamwork, people can break down barriers to working together. In a team situation, where everyone is contributing to and influencing the team, there is less chance that people will maintain, either consciously or unconsciously, a sense of superiority. In effective teamwork, the superiority/inferiority imbalances have a chance to be equaled out. [What](#)

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[have your experiences been with superiority/inferiority imbalance on teams?](#) In a team, at some point, each person's needs are secondary to the whole, and at some point, each person's needs may surface and be thoroughly supported by the team. Every member gets the front seat from time to time, so that individualism feeds the synergy of the whole, and teamwork neutralizes the status games people play.

Today's organizations are a collection of diverse groups and people. Teamwork is a great way to learn to work across diversity in a healthy way. Working together in a team that has a focused and a clearly designated output gives people a chance to apply their diverse perspectives and backgrounds to achieve a common goal. In the close-knit manner in which teams must work, there are many opportunities to put diversity to work constructively. Once this becomes the norm, team members become less aware of differences, and more aware of unity. [What opportunities exist in your work to put diversity to work constructively?](#)

Organizations are finding that to compete effectively, they must learn cooperation and collaboration skills, that liaisons are better than enemies, and that not much gets done without a lot of folks doing their job consistently and caringly.

To support the balanced involvement of everyone on the team, consider the following.

### Avoid Subtle Exclusion of Team Members

Some team members will ignore or gloss over a person in the group who has a different view. Sometimes team members do not want to take the time to review what might be a creative alternative. People often pre-judge or stereotype a person's ideas because that person does not appear to be part of the mainstream of the organization. [Have you ever been on either side of such a scenario?](#) The goal of healthy teamwork is to consider everyone's ideas and to depersonalize the inputs so that ideas stand on their own merit. Another goal of healthy teamwork is to build cohesiveness as a group, to become a working unit. A good team does not exclude certain members for any reason. If there are members who are simply unwilling to be a part of the team and refuse to be included, that is another matter. Subtle forms of exclusion, however, are inappropriate in teamwork. Subtle forms of exclusion may include:

- Not responding to a team member's comments
- Not seeking input from that team member
- Not inviting that team member to join you for a break or lunch
- Not seeking out a team member between team meetings (for short discussions, hallway chats, to work on something together, and so on)
- Not referring to that team member by name
- Not building on that team member's ideas

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Many organizations have included diversity awareness in their training. Some have targeted broad-sweeping organizational changes to decrease stereotyping and unfair employee practices. However, until individuals learn to be comfortable with and work productively with a diversity of people, little progress can be made. Until team members can work side by side, without stereotyping and making assumptions about one another, teams will have trouble performing.

## Become Comfortable with Diversity

Effective teamwork thrives on differences among its team members and builds on that diversity. Teams should not swallow up, or ignore, individuals, but instead fully utilize individual strengths to maximize team output. In healthy teams, members can talk openly about their differences, as they apply to working and getting along together, and because of this open acceptance of difference, the members can move forward to achieve targeted results as a team. True teamwork does not let members avoid people with whom they feel uncomfortable working. True teamwork demands that the members figure out how to work with other people.

Following are some ways team members can become comfortable with the diversity of their team and capitalize on the various talents of all members:

- Learn what others would like to get out of being on the team.
- Do not assume the other person thinks, feels, or sees things the same way you do.
- Reach out. Do not let yourself be intimidated by difference. Try to get to know others as unique individuals. Do not be daunted if there seems to be little common ground. Honor the differences. Show interest in the person. Sooner or later, there will be common ground.
- Find out what other people's work experience has been. Work is usually a common-ground experience for people. Remember not to focus on levels or positions in the organizations - this may push you further apart.
- Learn to ask open-ended questions to draw out the other person, such as, "What is your reaction to . . . ?" "What has been your experience with. . . ?" "How do you feel about. . . ?"
- Learn to dwell on ways you are similar to others on the team. Think of yourself and your teammates as all part of the human race and discover how that humanity plays out on the team.

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Keep this thought in mind:

When we look for differences, we find them. When we seek similarities, we find those too. The wise person searches for both, and in so doing discovers an individual.

## Advantages of diversity

If you can get along with a wide variety of people, you will be able to benefit from the following advantages of diversity:

- Knowledge and Perspective—A blended work force brings the knowledge and background of many types of people together. The more diverse employees are, the more perspectives to blend. The advantage is a variety of sources of information and expertise.
- Learning throughout the company—When new people come onto the team, it's an opportunity for everyone to learn. The more diverse the group, the greater the opportunity for growth. Employees can learn more about their customers and competitors from the people on their team.
- New directions—When teams diversify, new opportunities are often discovered. By bringing a fresh perspective, new members may be able to think of new products, services or ways to serve customers. A static work force often can't develop in this way.
- Adaptability—The more a work team reflects the world outside, the better prepared it will be to face business changes. Employees from a wide variety of backgrounds can come up with new processes and responses to work place changes.
- In order to be socially competent in the workplace, the ability to deal with a wide variety of people must be cultivated. By valuing the diversity encountered, it is possible to build strong partnerships. Respect for others will be an advantage.

Dialogue Questions are written in blue, embedded in the text.

Rees, Fran (1997) *Teamwork from Start to Finish*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer, Jossey-Bass Inc.

Skillssoft (2006) *Teamwork and Emotional Intelligence: Course*

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