



Values Based Leadership

Developing Inspirational Leaders

Leading Diverse Teams

by Karen Frost



There have been many observations and case studies written around the dynamics that exist in teams and whether having harmonious or complementary skills in the team members provides advantage or disadvantage to the culture and performance.

Harmonious teams evolve because there is a drive for members of teams to be similar. As the name suggests, harmonious teams have members with a similar approaches, who get on and who get the job done. Examples of a harmonious team are; a team of specialists such as software engineers who behave and work in similar ways; or a leader who recruits like-minded people to create 'team-fit'.

In contrast, complementary teams are by nature a 'mixed bunch' with a wide variety of skills and behaviours. As such, they can be dynamic, wide thinking and productive.

However, because there are so many differences they can fall out or conflict with each other. More leadership and management skills are needed with complementary teams if you want to guarantee high performance.

So, what happens when you have a multi-cultural team? Do these two distinctions and variations between the types of teams still occur? Most likely, multi-cultural teams are going to be more complementary than harmonious, simply because there is the added layer of cultural diversity. When you consider some of the layers of culture, such as; nationality, education, language and generation, there will be significant differences, even if the team are a group that have similar qualifications and skills. These complexities mean that leading and managing such teams requires sophisticated and artful leadership.



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Martha Maznevski, professor at IMD Business School, took time earlier this century to research how multicultural teams perform. The findings showed that the more diverse the team (with a wide set of complementary skills), the more likely the team was to underperform. The teams that performed best were more homogenous; from the same cultural background. However, what was most interesting was that the multi-cultural teams that had highly effective leaders out-performed the homogenous teams. What those of us involved with global organisations can take from these results is that our multi-cultural teams need highly effective and culturally diverse leaders.

From her research Maznevski has offered some insight into how to lead a diverse team. She talks about what she calls MBI – Mapping, Bridging and Integrating. Mapping is when a leader really learns to understand the differences that exist between the different cultural nuances of their team members. Bridging is when that leader is able to communicate across those differences, so, for example, creating a vision for the future where the communication style and approach is clearly understood by all. Finally, integration of the team is where the leader is able to manage the differences of the team at all levels and through time.

For me the word that rings out here is inclusion. To be able to map, bridge and integrate, we, as leaders, have to be inclusive in everything we do. Inclusion requires us to have self-awareness so that we are able to understand ourselves and our own national and corporate cultural background and experiences by learning about other cultures.

I have reviewed *Fish Can't See Water* by Kai Hammerich & Richard Lewis in our June 2014 issue of Voice (available at

www.vbleadership.com). In the book, the authors talk about business leaders finding it difficult to see their own cultural programming when looking in the mirror. To us we are normal, and it is only when we look at others that we see the differences. It is much easier to be inclusive if you recognise you are different in their eyes and that differences are to be celebrated not ridiculed. As Beth Brooke says in her article 'The Art of Developing Truly Global Leaders' (Harvard Business Review November 2012):

Unless a company also thinks about the art of global leadership, it will never reach its full potential on the world stage.

By "art" I mean values and habits that are hard to measure or instil through some step-by-step process but that show up unmistakably in great companies' cultures. I'm talking about a commitment to inclusive leadership. Leaders who create high-performing teams that are greater than the sum of the parts value difference as opposed to merely tolerating it. They are curious about other cultures and know to check their assumptions. They encourage discussion, actively engage conflicting points of view, and inspire teams to think creatively, all while pursuing a common mission.

<http://hbr.org/2012/11/the-art-of-developing-truly-global-leaders/ar/1>

So be inclusive, be curious and be encouraging. It seems to work.



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