

Opinion: Diversity makes us smarter

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Longuele Dieudonnee (left), from Congo, Solomon Kamara (center), from Liberia, and other students attend a rally held in Oakland International High School's cafeteria. The school, in Oakland, California, caters to newcomers from 33 different countries, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Guatemala, Iraq, Somalia and Mongolia. Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times/MCT

Just the word "diversity" can cause anxiety and conflict. Companies value diversity. At the same time, they still face lawsuits in court for not hiring enough nonwhites, and their leadership is still mainly white and male. The Supreme Court cannot agree on diversity's strong points or how to accomplish it.

The benefits of different expertise are obvious. What about social diversity, the diversity of race and other characteristics? Research has shown that social diversity in a group can make people uncomfortable and awkward. They lack trust and experience many other problems. So what is the benefit?

If you want to build teams or groups capable of new ideas and discoveries, you need diversity. Diversity enhances creativity and encourages curiosity, leading to better problem solving. Diversity can help companies earn more and lead to new discoveries and ideas. This conclusion comes from many years of research from leading experts.

Information And Innovation

Informational diversity is when people bring different points of view and information to group problem solving. People who are different from one another bring different knowledge and experiences. A male and a female engineer might look at things as differently as an engineer and a doctor.

Research on large, innovative groups has shown that informational diversity is a good thing. For example, two business professors studied the effect of having more women leaders in top companies. They found that companies with more women did better and came up with more new ideas. Another study found the same thing about having more nonwhite leaders at banks.

How Diversity Promotes Better Thinking

One problem with studies on large groups is that they only show that diversity happens alongside better performance. They do not show that it causes better performance. We can make some casual connections by looking at diversity in small groups.

In 2006, several well-known professors and I decided to study the effect of racial diversity on small groups. Our groups were given a task. In order to succeed, our subjects needed to be good at sharing information. They were put in three-person groups, some all-white, others with two whites and one nonwhite. Then, they were asked to perform a mystery exercise. All group members had the same common information, but each member also had information that only he or she knew. To find out who committed the crime, the group members needed to share everything. The groups with racial diversity did better than the groups with no racial diversity. Being with similar people leads us to think we all hold the same information and ideas, which stopped the all-white groups from sharing information effectively.

This effect is not limited to race. For example, last year a study was done where participants were asked what political party they belonged to. Then, they had to read a mystery story and write an essay about who they thought committed the crime. Afterwards, they all were told that they needed to convince another person they disagreed with. Half were told to make their case to a member of the opposing political party. The other half were told to make a case to a member of their own party. Those who had to convince a member of their own party were not as prepared. When disagreement comes from a socially different person, we try harder.

The Power Of Anticipation

Diversity is not only about bringing different points of view to a problem. Simply adding social diversity makes people expect different points of view, which changes their behavior.

Members of a group of people who are the same think they will understand each other. They assume they will be able to easily come to an agreement. But when members of a group notice they are socially different from one another, they expect differences of opinion and point of view. They think they will need to work harder in order to agree. People in diverse environments work differently, both mentally and socially, leading to better results.

Imagine you are writing a section of a paper for a presentation. You expect some difficulties because one person you are writing with is American and you are Chinese. Chances are, you will work harder to explain your thinking and expect alternatives.

Diversity works by promoting hard work and creativity and by encouraging the consideration of alternatives. We need diversity, in teams, organizations and society as a whole, if we are to change and grow.

Quiz

- 1 Which idea from the article supports the author's claim that diversity improves the work people do?
 - (A) Sometimes people feel awkward working in socially diverse groups.
 - (B) Companies with women leaders and nonwhite leaders had more new ideas.
 - (C) Some companies have been sued in court for not hiring enough nonwhite people.
 - (D) Leading experts have studied diversity in companies for many years.

- 2 Read the section "The Power Of Anticipation." When people notice they are socially different from each other, how do their expectations change?
 - (A) They expect they will have different points of view.
 - (B) They expect they will have a more interesting conversation.
 - (C) They expect they will have a harder time getting along.
 - (D) They expect they will have very little in common.

- 3 Read the sentences from the article.

If you want to build teams or groups capable of new ideas and discoveries, you need diversity. Diversity enhances creativity and encourages curiosity, leading to better problem solving.

What would be the BEST replacement for "enhances" in the second sentence?

- (A) improves
- (B) discourages
- (C) challenges
- (D) recognizes

- 4 Read the excerpt from the article.

Being with similar people leads us to think we all hold the same information and ideas, which stopped the all-white groups from sharing information effectively.

What is meant by the word "effectively" in the sentence above?

- (A) well
- (B) at all
- (C) reluctantly
- (D) right away