Leading Diverse Teams

Introduction

Diverse teams have become common practice in today’s world. More than ever, businesses are expanding globally and building partnerships with companies across industries, establishing the need for diverse teams to work in the best interest of the company. Businesses are left facing the challenge of how to build, develop, manage, and lead these diverse teams. For instance, when Coca-Cola decided to produce gold cans in support of the 2010 Winter Olympics, an assorted team was required, including various members from the Olympics team and Coca Cola’s marketing, manufacturing, and distribution departments. Managing a team with members that have various backgrounds, experiences, and cultures—similar to Coca Cola’s Winter Olympics campaign team—can be quite a challenge.

In order to understand how to lead diverse teams, it is important to first recognize the differences between diverse and homogeneous teams. This reading will explore these distinctions as well as will discuss how to effectively lead a diverse team.

Differences between Diverse and Homogeneous Teams

In simple terms, diverse teams include people with a wide variety of experiences, cultures, and opinions. On the other hand, homogeneous teams consist of people from similar backgrounds with similar viewpoints. Diverse teams often differ from homogeneous teams based on physical and social differences, such as gender, age, race, culture, profession, work experience, and disabilities. These differences provide unique challenges, advantages, pitfalls, and performance standards for diverse teams compared to typical homogeneous teams.

The primary challenge for diverse teams is the fact that members of the team are all different. Different points of view, misunderstandings, and stereotypes can contribute to the ineffectiveness of the team. For example, a team that consists of members from a variety of cultural backgrounds can affect how the team communicates and interacts with one another. While one culture may prefer face-to-face verbal interactions, another culture may view that approach as unnecessary and a waste of time. For example, a person from an Asian culture might prefer face-to-face business interactions, while the behavior preference for another person from an American culture may favor impersonal relations. These differences cause a wider range of views and perspectives, often resulting in conflict.
On the other hand, the advantages of a diverse team often outweigh the challenges presented in such a team. Diversity fosters new ideas and creativity that is often not seen by teams with members more similar in nature. If team energy is spent on reaching a common goal by using everyone’s exceptional abilities and perspectives, the team’s performance can expand well past that of a homogeneous team. For instance, a marketing team consisting of members from a variety of cultures, age ranges, and educational experiences are better suited to understand the needs and wants of customers from markets across the globe.

Pitfalls often lead to the demise of the team. Members of a diverse team that hold on to preconceived notions and stereotypes are unable to see past each other’s differences and are unable to respect each other for their uniqueness. Diverse teams also tend to want to suppress their diversity in hopes of being accepted to the group. These destructive behaviors can cause members to withdraw from the group, resulting in low performing teams.

Team performance is often charted against a typical bell curve with low performing teams on the far left hand side of the curve, average performing teams in the middle, and high performing teams on the far right hand side of the curve. Below is a graphical representation of a bell curve that notes team performance.

![Bell Curve](image)

According to research, diverse teams tend to perform in either the low performing or high performing categories. Either diverse teams are bogged down by their challenges and pitfalls, unable to overcome their differences, or excel in their performance by using their differences to be more innovative and creative than their peers. In comparison,
homogeneous teams frequently fall into the average performing category with some who experience more conflict and falling below average and some who join together to experience above average performance.

**How to Lead Diverse Teams to High Performance**

In a 2007 video presentation on how to lead diverse teams, Dr. Martha Maznevski discusses how to effectively lead a group of people with diverse differences. Dr. Maznevski is a professor and MBA Program Director at IMD Business School in Switzerland as well as an author of numerous articles and books on the subject of organizational behavior, specializing in leadership, teams, and diversity. She has a wealth of practical experience consulting and advising businesses across the globe on how to manage and lead people globally. Dr. Maznevski states that there are three important things—mapping, bridging, and integrating—that leaders must know and implement in order to build high performing diverse teams. These three items will be explained in further detail below.

- **Mapping** – Dr. Maznevski claims that in order to lead diverse teams to high performance, mapping is required as the first step in achieving such a goal. Mapping means identifying each member’s differences and similarities, such as personality, gender, culture, profession, work experience, skill abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. This step involves the team members listing each member’s name on a piece of paper with their corresponding differences and similarities. This process helps members recognize and take advantage of everyone’s abilities and aspects of diversity toward the performance of the team.

- **Bridging** – According to Dr. Maznevski, the next step toward leading a high performing diverse team is bridging. Bridging includes communicating effectively through active listening, speaking, and understanding with consideration for the member’s differences. Dr. Maznevski notes that bridging can be broken into three additional steps: approaching, decentering, and recentering.

  1. **Approaching** – This step requires members of the team to be motivated to approach other members and truly understand their differences. The simple task of being motivated to understand one another builds the foundation for a strong performing team.

  2. **Decentering** – Decentering means to listen from other member’s perspectives and differing points of view. Empathizing with another
person’s point of view helps to reinforce the acceptance of the different aspects of diversity within the team.

3. Recentering – The final step of bridging is recentering. This step requires team members to develop common team goals, norms, definitions, and objectives. Establishing these components creates a common environment for the team to excel.

- Integrating – The final step to building a high performing diverse team is integrating. Integrating consists of building team participation, resolving conflict, and creating innovation. Dr. Maznevski emphasizes the correlation between teams that integrate well, also experience high performance. She also notes that in order to reach the integrating step, diverse teams must move through the mapping and then bridging steps.

These three stages that Dr. Maznevski outlines for building and leading high performing diverse teams are sequential. If a team does not complete the mapping stage, then the team is never able to move on to the bridging stage. Likewise, if a team does not complete the bridging stage, then the team is never able to move on to the integrating stage. Teams that perform well spend time mapping their differences, bridging their diversities, and then letting performance take its course through integrating.

Summary:

- The primary challenge for diverse teams is the actual differences that make up the team, including different points of view, misunderstandings, and stereotypes.
- A diverse team includes the unique advantages of diverse ideas and creativity.
- The pitfalls for diverse teams consist of members holding on to preconceived notions and stereotypes without regard to their strengths and uniqueness.
- Diverse teams tend to perform in either the low performing or high performing categories, while homogeneous teams perform in the average performing category.
- Dr. Maznevski, an organizational leadership professor, author, and consultant, claims there are three important things that leaders must know.
and implement in order to build high performing diverse teams: mapping, bridging, and integrating.

- During mapping, the team identifies each member’s differences and similarities.
- During bridging, team members communicate through active listening, speaking, and understanding with consideration for other member’s differences. Bridging is broken down into three additional steps:
  1. approaching: to be motivated to approach other members and understand their differences;
  2. decentering: to listen from other member’s perspectives; and
  3. recentering: to develop common team goals, norms, definitions, and objectives.
- During integrating, team members work to build team participation, resolve conflict, and innovate.