

Creating Harmony through Diversity

By Bryan Howard, BM, MA, PMP

The full definition of **diversity** found on <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> is *the condition of having or being composed of differing elements; the inclusion of different types of people in a group or organization; an instance of being composed of differing elements or qualities*. The website defines **harmony** as *the combination of different musical notes played or sung at the same time to produce a pleasing sound; a pleasing combination or arrangement of different things*.

Both terms, often viewed as unrelated, are in fact interrelated. In this article I will discuss interpersonal skills described in the Project Management Institute's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, 5th edition (PMBOK Guide®) that Project Managers can use to make the most of diverse backgrounds, ideas, and experiences to complete projects that meet stakeholder needs and expectations.

Project Managers must capitalize on the strengths of all team members. Section 9.4.2.4 of the PMBOK Guide® outlines three interpersonal skills necessary to accomplish this. They are leadership, influencing, and effective decision making. The illustrations that follow reveal how these skills, when applied, can positively impact project management. In addition, specific competencies and tools and techniques are examined that contribute to the application of these skills.

I am a Musician. I am also a Project Manager. Both require discipline, dedication, and determination. Speaking from the musician's point of view, I see leadership from the perspective of the symphony orchestra Conductor. The Community Arts Music Association in Santa Barbara, California describes the dynamics of an orchestra. Today's full size orchestra includes about 100 musicians playing in various sections and performing different roles for the team that contribute to the overall sound, interpretation, and final performance. As leader, the conductor sets the tempo, dynamics, and blend. The string section frequently plays the melody; the phrases we find ourselves humming later. The woodwinds add texture and color while the brass provides intensity and punctuation. The percussion section underscores the performance with rhythmic support.

As a team everyone has the same goal but each section and individual player is unique. Members come from many cultures and backgrounds. Adapting to each other as musicians is essential to producing a harmonious outcome. Instruments sound vastly different and each can also be played for solo purposes with individual liberties taken with the music based on that one interpretation. Leadership skills are required to guide musicians in the transition from soloist to orchestra member.

Key leader competencies include keeping team members informed through interesting and engaging communication, encouraging others with a personal commitment to exceptional results, building and earning trust by seeking ideas and inputs from diverse team members, and providing honest feedback. These behaviors allow project managers to resolve conflicting needs and interests, promote engagement, and transform a diverse group of individuals into a strong, collaborative, performing team.

The second interpersonal skill discussed in the PMBOK Guide® is influencing. During rehearsals musicians often have ideas about how select passages should be played. Sometimes, these are in conflict with the conductor or other members of the orchestra. Collaborative listening is an effective influencing technique for resolving such conflicting ideas. Consider the following example that demonstrates how collaborative listening influenced and ultimately led to a positive impact in one of my recent music projects.

I am currently recording a solo piano album. In the initial planning meeting with the studio engineer it was recommended that I wear headphones and listen to a click track during the recording session which would serve the same purpose as a metronome and ensure a steady and consistent beat throughout each song. I initially dismissed this suggestion. As a trained musician I felt it would prohibit me from playing expressively with tempo phrasings; accelerandos, ritardandos, fermatas, etc. However, when I listened to a cut from the first session I discovered that the expressive passages were exactly what I wanted, but sections where there should be no variation in the beat were filled with irregular tempo shifts – enough to be noticeably distracting to even the most indiscriminate listener.

During the next week I repeatedly practiced these passages at home using a metronome until the beat was etched in my mind. With this new level of preparation the next recording session produced solid, steady performances while allowing me to play with expression and variation as needed. This experience served as a reminder to listen collaboratively and remain open and willing to be influenced by the ideas and suggestions of others. Once I set aside my view of how the recording session should go and listened to the engineer without a preconceived filter, the course of the project shifted to a shared approach and resulted in a better outcome. Listening collaboratively allows one to adequately articulate their point of view and to still influence or be influenced by others.

Another example that highlights the importance of influencing came from an experience I had in college. As a music major we studied all forms and styles of music. I was introduced for the first time to works from the modern and contemporary classical music periods; composers such as Mahler, Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. These writers made use of dissonant tones and their compositions lacked form, structure, patterns, and key signatures. At first, this concept or style of music was difficult for me to understand and embrace because it was in direct conflict with anything I had experienced, studied, or known before.

Lacking the patterns of Bach and Beethoven, the music was foreign to me, therefore, I determined that I would study the works in order to earn a passing grade then discard them. My inclination was to dismiss these different forms of expression as irrelevant. However, given time, study, understanding, and collaboration with professors and peers I

learned to appreciate this music genre and the powerful way it can lead audiences to new heights of experience.

When combined with leadership and influencing, these two interpersonal skills provide a solid foundation for the third interpersonal skill listed in the PMBOK Guide®, effective decision making. This involves negotiating, communicating, and implementing accepted decisions. A simple tool for effective decision making that I often use is writing a list of pros and cons. Advantages and disadvantages can be substituted for pros and cons. In addition, complex or strategic decisions can be assigned a weighting and scored appropriately. Here's the conventional method. List each idea. Then create two columns under each idea; one for pros and another for cons. Document as many positive or negative consequences for a particular idea in the appropriate column. When finished, compare the number of items in each list or if weighted, sum the scores for each side. This will provide an overall indication of the value for that idea. The greater the difference, the more attractive the proposal!

Repeat this process for each idea generated. Documenting potential decisions in this way is a great tool Project Managers can use to gain clarity, increase objectivity, and avoid predisposed notions. Develop a template for this process to provide a structured way to involve others in the decision making process and to ensure consideration of diverse viewpoints.

When artfully used, leadership, influencing, and effective decision making can minimize conflict and overcome barriers to a successful project. Here are three key points to remember.

1. Diversity should be embraced as a benefit rather than something to avoid. Learning to incorporate multiple viewpoints through consensus leads to collaboration and finding alternative solutions to problems
2. Expecting and accepting differences can bring about growth within the team, lead to creative solutions and outcomes, and increase productivity and working relationships among team members
3. Conflict resolution should focus on issues not people and on the present instead of the past. Remaining open is essential to creating harmony.

In conclusion, leadership, influence, and effective decision making skills involve embracing differences. This leads to adopting new ideas and approaches and breaking down boundaries that limit our shared success. Embracing differences has taught me that diverse backgrounds, ideas, and experiences can result in harmony and collaboration; not only for Project Management but in every aspect of our lives. Creating harmony through diversity leads to successful outcomes, is rewarding and inspiring, and redefines the way we view and interact with our world.

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About the Author



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Bryan Howard is a senior project program manager with AT&T Services, Inc. in Nashville, Tennessee, USA. He was born in Greenville, Kentucky, USA and graduated from Hughes Kirk High School in Beechmont, Kentucky. During high school he studied piano with the renowned Karen Willis. He earned his Bachelor of Music degree in piano performance from Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, USA studying with Sylvia Kersenbaum, a concert artist from Buenos Aires, Argentina. He also graduated Summa cum Laude from Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee, USA with a Master of Arts degree in Organizational Management.

Bryan's background and training in music prepared him for a successful career in sales, organizational leadership, and project management. Over the past 20 years he has filled various roles in the telecommunications industry with positions held at AT&T in the Finance organization and Consumer and Business Retail Markets.

Currently, Bryan serves as Senior Project Program Manager with AT&T Services, Inc. and is certified as a Project Management Professional (PMP®) by the Project Management Institute. He is recognized for his ability to lead teams and implement change and plays a pivotal role in assessing and managing project risks, jeopardies, escalations, and problem resolutions to ensure customer satisfaction. He is an expert in identifying ways to condense project delivery timelines, staying engaged as a leader, goal setting and achievement, communication, and assessing competencies.

Bryan is actively engaged in personal, technical, and professional development. He is skilled in managing time and mentoring others in time management. Throughout his career, Bryan has received multiple awards and recognition for top performance.

As a volunteer Bryan is a past Vice-President and President of the AT&T Pioneers Tennessee Chapter 21, Greater Nashville Council and has worked through that organization with Habitat for Humanity and Junior Achievement. Bryan resides in Antioch, Tennessee, USA with his wife, Julie. They are the parents of four grown children and have one granddaughter. He can be contacted at bryan.howard@att.com