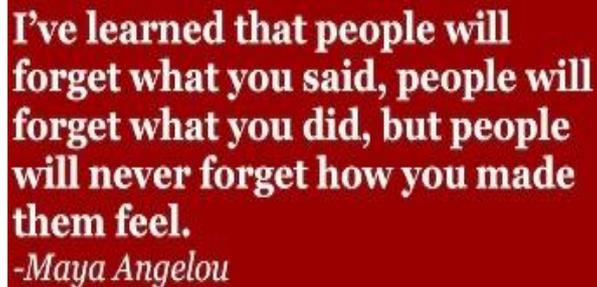


Improve Your Diversity Intelligence: Eliminate Your Blind Spots

By Paul Pelletier LL.B. PMP



**I've learned that people will
forget what you said, people will
forget what you did, but people
will never forget how you made
them feel.**
-Maya Angelou

In our highly diverse workplaces, diversity intelligence is critical to success. Project management leaders who leverage diversity to develop, motivate and empower people to achieve extraordinary results aren't acting randomly. By aligning diversity intelligence (DI) with leadership strategies and communication practices to ensure a truly collaborative, inclusive and engaging work environment, we can inspire our high performance teams and improve our project success. DI, like other skills, is a competency that requires learning and constant improvement – as the dynamics of our diverse workplaces change, so must we.

One of the most effective ways to improve diversity intelligence is by understanding and overcoming our diversity “blind spots.” This requires both self-awareness and a deeper appreciation that diversity goes well beyond the obvious surface characteristics of people.

A Review - What is Diversity Intelligence?

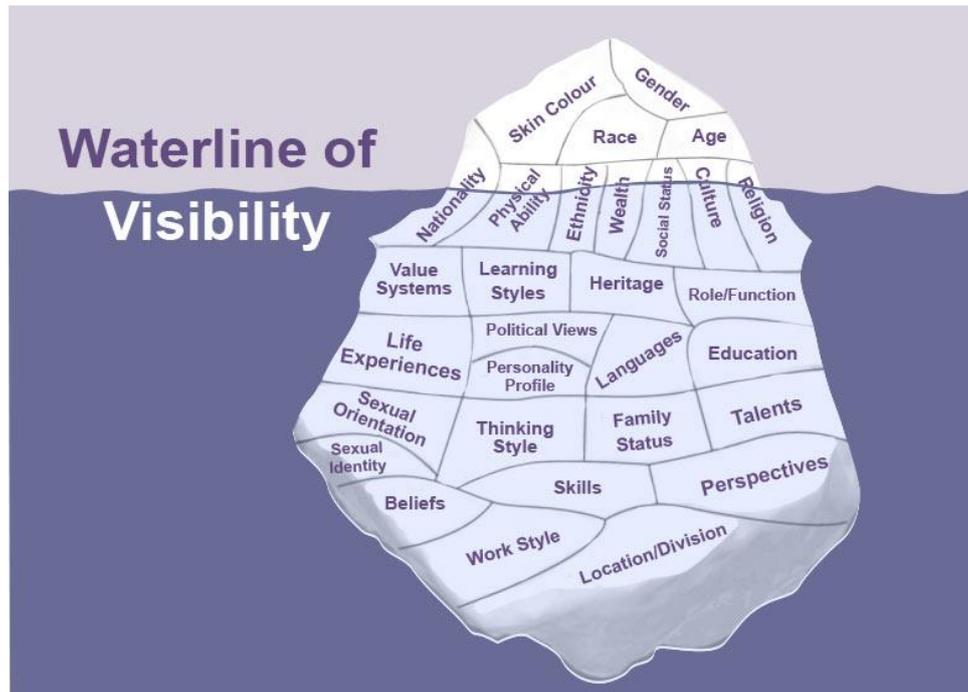
DI is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual. The concept of diversity intelligence encompasses acceptance and respect. It is the exploration of our differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment.

By integrating workers from culturally diverse backgrounds into their workforce organizations become much stronger and their project success rate improves. Diversity intelligent leaders ensure that diversity is an integral part of the business plan, essential to successful projects, programs, products and increased sales. This is especially true in today's global marketplace, as organizations interact with different cultures and clients.

The Diversity Iceberg

We tend (often without even knowing it) to regard diversity through the lens of the most obvious physical and superficial traits of those around us. For example, we categorize people

by virtue of their age, gender, and race. This makes sense - after all, age, race and gender are traits you can see in the flesh. But these and other physical attributes like skin colour are only a small part of the diversity picture. There are many other characteristics that merit consideration. Behavioral psychologists and social scientists use “the Diversity Iceberg” to demonstrate this problem, where visible traits like race, gender and other physical attributes sit at the top above the waterline, while a larger portion of non-visible characteristics lurk below.



The Diversity Iceberg Illustration

The Diversity Iceberg is a marvellous tool to assist in improving our diversity intelligence. The key point of the iceberg is that the core of our identity is made up of the dimensions that exist below the surface. These buried qualities are critical to our individuality and provide the actual essence of diversity.

Our Diversity Blind Spots

Uncovering our personal biases, prejudices and “diversity blind spots” is essential to improving diversity intelligence. First, let’s acknowledge that we find comfort in hanging out with similar people. Whether it’s an ethnic community, a religious connection or our political views, our instinct is to surround ourselves and hire those like us. I call these “diversity comfort zones.” It’s awkward to move out of the security blanket of diversity comfort zones. These comfort zones can easily lead to group think and reduced innovation – with only one predominant perspective, tunnel vision is natural. There are some excellent tools that help PM leaders get comfortable with feeling initially uncomfortable when they venture outside their diversity comfort zones.

It is also normal behavior to analyze and categorize people so that we can determine where they “fit” in our world. Unfortunately, our categorization processes often involve making presumptions and quick judgments about people based on our pre-conceived biases and prejudices. For example, when we find out a person is from a particular ethnicity, we may assume they automatically like a particular kind of food or speak another language. This is what I call a “diversity blind spot.” A blind spot represents either a lack of diversity awareness, prejudice, or inaccurate preconceived notions about people. Blind spots can lead to embarrassing workplace moments and unintended offence. They also create biases in workplace practices and stifle creativity.

It’s important to accept the fact that we all are conditioned throughout our lives with different behavioral, cultural, and moral standards. These impact how we view others and our workplace behavior. As social beings, humans naturally gravitate and give preference to what we can relate to. However, if we aren’t aware of our blind spots and biases, we are more likely to hold onto such pre-judgments for the sake of prejudice.

Blind spots inevitably lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. They also reduce team engagement and negatively impact our leadership and success. Acknowledging our blind spots improves our self-awareness, maturity and enhances diversity intelligence. It takes effort and character to see beyond our box and respectfully embrace cultures and experiences that differ from ours. Project managers with advanced diversity intelligence have a deep awareness of their biases and adopt strategies to counter our tendencies to judge and conclude too quickly.

It’s Not About You

As leaders, solving the diversity equation is no easy task. In addition to their own blind spots, leaders must remember that every person they work with has their own conditioning and biases. Leaders should constantly make a concerted effort to be more approachable – in simple terms, make it easier for those who might be uncomfortable interacting with you. Think about their diversity comfort zones and blind spots. Open up conversations that dispel their fears, erase their pre-conceived notions and genuinely prove you are interested in whom they really are (below the iceberg’s surface). Focus on “them” rather than on “you.” By working on helping others gain confidence communicating with you, you will also become more comfortable interacting with those different from you.

Conclusion

Diversity intelligence provides project managers with strategic insight necessary to give us that competitive edge we all strive for, regardless of sector or type of project. That edge lies within understanding and engaging those you lead – the key to harnessing the creative talent within is creating the ideal environment for innovation in the first place. Organizations and PM leaders must develop high levels of diversity intelligence in order to inspire effectively. That environment is one that values relationships, personal growth, positive reinforcement, and brainstorming - a place (and project) where everyone’s ideas matter.

By appreciating our diversity blind spots and comfort zones and improving our communication strategies practices to focus on those we serve, we improve our diversity

intelligence. We grow and mature as leaders. Are you ready to eliminate your diversity blind spots?

REFERENCES

1. Al-Jenaibi, B. (2011). The scope and impact of workplace diversity in the United Arab Emirates an initial study. *Journal for Communication and Culture*. 1(2), 49-81.
2. Amadeo, K. (2013). Cultural Diversity. Retrieved from <http://useconomy.about.com/od/suppl1/g/Cultural-Diversity.htm>.
3. Białostocka, P. (2010). Cultural Diversity in Organisational Theory and Practice. *Journal of Intercultural Management*. 2(2), 5-15.
4. Hinsen, Ben. (2016). Organizational Ergonomics: Workplace Diversity, Inclusion and Fusion. Retrieved from <https://hickamsdictum.com/achieving-organizational-diversity-d7980e533b2a#.8wndrt3az>
5. Moore, T. W. (n.d.). Individual Differences and Workplace Spirituality: The Homogenization of the Corporate Culture. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research*. pp. 79-93.

About the Author



Paul Pelletier

Vancouver, BC, Canada



Paul Pelletier, LL.B., PMP, is a workplace respect consultant, corporate lawyer, project manager and executive. He works with organizations to prevent, manage and eliminate workplace bullying. His book “*Workplace Bullying – It’s just Bad for Business*” highlights how bullying is lethal to project management and business success. He also serves as a member of the PMI Ethics Member Advisory Group. He has published articles, presented webinars, workshops and been a presenter at many PMI events, including Global Congresses, Leadership Institute Meetings and Chapter events.

Paul Pelletier can be reached at www.paulpelletierconsulting.com or ppelletier@telus.net