

Diversity Intelligence: Drawing People Towards You Through Awareness

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Today's project management leaders feel constant pressure to innovate and position their products, services, and teams more creatively than ever before. However, in our highly diverse workplaces, diversity intelligence is critical to success. 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.

The Impact of Workplace Diversity

The world is shrinking every day. Globalization means companies from virtually anywhere can sell to customers from virtually anywhere, and local markets continue to become more and more cosmopolitan due to immigration. Target demographics are changing, and organizations that ignore those changes will one day find themselves without clients or anyone to sell to. However, to stay relevant, businesses must do more than simply cater their project, programs, products and services to these increasingly diverse demographics. In fact, it's unlikely they can even do that successfully without fostering workplace diversity.

What is Workplace Diversity?

To improve our diversity intelligence, we must first understand workplace diversity. Diversity means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. Diversity extends beyond race or ethnicity, religion, culture or newcomer status to include factors such as geography, language, politics, gender, beliefs, economic status, abilities, skills and interests.

A diverse workplace reflects our communities. Diversity is actually rooted in merit and in the appreciation of differences. It focuses on finding the right candidate for the right job regardless of (not because of) his or her ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexual

orientation, certain physical/mental abilities, marital status, education, and socioeconomic status – and then leveraging the various benefits that come with having a diverse workforce.

What is Diversity Intelligence?

It 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 project management 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.

Benefits of Workplace Diversity

Workplace diversity can make organizations and teams more productive and profitable. They also bring differences that we must understand and embrace for those benefits to be realized. Among the advantages of diversity in the workplace are: better problem solving, higher productivity, better employee relations, new language skills, better client insight, and new processes.

- 1. Better problem solving** comes when different people bring different attitudes and experiences to the table. This helps project teams avoid groupthink, provides deeper insight on issues, and challenges people to think outside the box. There is no one best answer to any question--the more ideas you can obtain from different people, the more likely you are to develop a workable answer.
- 2. Higher productivity** occurs exponentially when people of all cultures pull together towards a single inspiring goal. Studies show that the more an organization's staff reflects its demographics, the better its bottom line and program success. That's because the people within the organization have a better understanding of their target audience.
- 3. Better employee relations** are a significant benefit of workplace diversity. Employees need to feel valued if they want to reach their full potential. PM leaders that embrace diversity tend to have lower absenteeism and turnover, and higher levels of loyalty.
- 4. Language skills** are obviously needed in today's increasingly global economy--and diverse workers often have this proficiency. To truly build relationships with the other people of the world, we must speak their language. It is a tremendous advantage of workplace diversity if we enable people from other cultures can help us understand not just their words, but also the meaning behind what they are saying.

5. Better client insight is crucial. By relating to people of all backgrounds, we gain a greater perspective on how different cultures operate and experience greater success in projects as a result.

6. New processes can result when people with different ideas come together and collaborate. In today's fast-moving world, there is no longer room for thinking, "We have always done things this way and cannot change." Workers must bring multiple skills to the environment, think cross culturally, and adapt quickly to new situations. Those who meet these criteria are likely to do well, regardless of culture--even in tough economic times.

Improving Your Diversity Intelligence

There are many tools and strategies that help project management leaders improve their DI to manage team relationships and move their engagement levels to drive performance. Among the most effective tools are adaptable communication practices, understanding our diversity "blind spots", appreciating our comfort zones and developing an action plan to ensure we follow through.

1. Adaptable communication practices are a critical pillar of advanced DI. People from different backgrounds, cultures, countries, sexes, ages have different approaches to communication, motivation and idea creation – by expanding our awareness of diversity, we can create opportunity for people to feel empowered and thrive as both individuals and teams.

2. Diversity "blind spots" can impede our progress. An important component of improving DI is through understanding our own natural unconscious biases that influence our opinions and decision-making. 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.

3. Diversity "comfort zones" must be overcome. Our instinct is to surround ourselves and hire those like us. It's awkward to move out of the security blanket of comfort zones. There are some excellent tools that help PM leaders get comfortable with feeling initially uncomfortable so that they can improve their DI.

4. Developing an action plan is about reinforcing a commitment to change. A DI action plan includes specific follow-up steps and strategies to address roadblocks to success.

DI provides project managers with strategic insight necessary to give us that competitive edge we all strive for, regardless of profession. 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.

About the Author



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