PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Diverse Teams are More Successful!
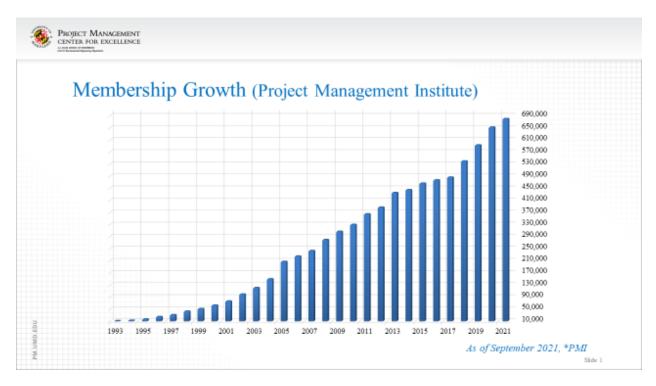by John Cable
Commentary

Diverse Teams are More Successful! [1]

By John Cable, Director

Project Management Center for Excellence
A. James Clark School of Engineering
University of Maryland, USA

Today, it is well recognized that more and more work is executed by teams. It is no longer just architects, engineers, construction companies, consulting companies, and software developers that deliver their work by project teams. In virtually every facet of business and government, it is now recognized that the way to accomplish a task is to organize a team focused on getting the job done. Growth in interest in the management of projects is evident simply by looking at the membership in project management associations.

While teams accomplish more work than ever before, we still experience stunning failure rates in delivering successful projects. According to a report published by Team Stage titled *"31 Pivotal Project Management Statistics for 2021[2]"* 70% of all projects fail! So, the

---

[1] How to cite this article: Cable, J. (2021). Diverse Teams are More Successful! Commentary, *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue XII, December.

[2] https://teamstage.io/project-management-statistics/

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Diverse Teams are More Successful!
by John Cable
Commentary

question becomes, what can we do to encourage teams to be successful? The answer might surprise you! Evidence shows that nonhomogeneous teams are simply smarter[3]. Working with people who are not the same, challenges everyone to think outside their usual comfort zone and become sharper and more competitive. Therefore, designing your teams to be more diverse is one key to success.

The first step is to redefine "diversity" in your workplace culture. Diversity has traditionally referred to demographic categories like race and gender, but diversity experts are now expanding far beyond that meaning of the word, considering a much broader range of factors. Given that statement, then what is diversity?

 "It means **understanding that each individual is unique and recognizing our individual differences**. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies."[4]

Aiming to increase diversity in the workplace is not a futile effort. Plain and simple…its good business strategy. The HBR article titled "*Why Diverse Teams are Smarter*" cites a 2015 McKinsey report that found that public companies in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry mean. In addition, those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above the industry mean.[5]

The HBR article is only one of many that document diverse teams in different work situations are simply better. Why is this? Let us look at some ideas.

Diverse teams drive better decision-making

Kevin Coleman, "The Empowerment Coach" at KMC Empowerment LLC, talks about asking more questions that might be uncomfortable to ask and challenging of others' viewpoints. A person who might be seen as a team outlier could be the one who can up level the project, simply because they asked questions and challenged thoughts, causing new perspectives to be introduced, resulting in new ideas. This is how teams grow and create the best outcomes.[6]

We all bring different perspectives, knowledge, and experience to our workplace. It is because of those differences that we see things uniquely. Having more perspectives on issues actually gives you more solutions. If you know how to use your team's diversity,

---

[3] https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter
[4] https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/diversity/definition.html
[5] https://hbr.org/2018/07/the-other-diversity-dividend?ab=at_art_art_1x1
[6] https://hbr.org/2016/09/diverse-teams-feel-less-comfortable-and-thats-why-they-perform-better?ab=at_art_art_1x1

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Diverse Teams are More Successful!
by John Cable
Commentary

you get better decisions, better data, and a better sense of what it all means going forward.

We have all heard the Golden Rule: Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. Coleman suggests implementing the "Platinum Rule": Communicate with others the way you would have them communicate unto you". He says, referencing Stephen Covey's, "*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*," that the fifth attribute from that list is the one that resonates most.

"That attribute is, 'Seek first to understand before being understood,'" he said. "If you're building diverse teams and a diverse workforce, seek first to understand. Ask to know about the other people, find out how they'll fit in to the company and the project, and how you can use each person's ability and skills to the best advantage of everyone."

Nonhomogeneous teams tend to:

- Be more innovative,
- Focus more on facts,
- Process facts more carefully,
- Re-examine facts and remain objective, and
- If errors do occur, they are more likely to be corrected during deliberations.

On the other hand, homogenous teams tend to embrace "group-think" and be much more prone to errors. While the natural desire to associate with similar people may provide a social benefit because of a shared culture and sense of belonging, it really imposes significant costs to the long-term health of an organization.

The goal is to remain mindful that the more we separate people into different categories — such as male, female, a certain race, or a certain ethnicity — the less inclusive we can become. We want to look at ways to find commonality so that we can take advantage of our diversity.

It is important to remember that increasing diversity does not, on its own, increase your company's effectiveness. What matters is how your organization harnesses its diversity, and if it is inclined toward redesigning its power structure. The racial and gender diversity, equity and inclusion piece is critical, but if diversity is only referenced in those terms, we are missing some key nuances.

Success lies in building people's self-awareness and allowing them to have confidence in offering and delivering what they can do. There are many useful soft skills that could make a significant difference to the team's work. Moreover, even if you are on a team of all mechanical engineers, be assured that they are not all the same. Recognize your personal strength and own it.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Diverse Teams are More Successful!
by John Cable
Commentary

Integrating diversity at all levels of the organization

Functional diversity means you have implemented a process for people to communicate at all levels. This can make the difference in a new project, like putting in a new financial system. You need the people who run the capital project and the people in different functional units to contribute. They have different needs from the same system, and the only way you can find out what those needs are is to include them in the development process.

Then, there is positional/role diversity. The view from upper management is very different from mid-management or the rank-and-file workers. How do they see solutions? If a client wants to speak to a senior person, there might be bountiful sources of information, but people will have wildly differing perspectives. So, it's important to include people at all levels of the organization in all functional units to find out the conditions on the ground as work proceeds on organizational change.

Evidence shows that liberal arts and engineering combined bring better, more creative solutions. That means diversity of professional experience forces you to think less about educational background and more about hands-on work expertise. This is an opportunity to demonstrate value for professional expertise. If you place maximum value on the lived, professional experience of your team, rather than their educational background, you are becoming open to extraordinary possibilities.

Don't discount the people with soft skills. There are many things that are not part of your actual job description that are still a part of your skill set. Your professional experience might not be right for the team, but other abilities, such as strong communication or the ability to negotiate, could put you on a diversity project. Those skills could be your diversity, especially if you are not an engineer. The team may have one dominant strength but lack certain key strengths. Rather than expect all engineers to have suitable de-escalation skills, using another person who has them could add a level of backbone to the team.

Diversifying your employee pool is critical for boosting your company's joint intellectual potential. Creating a more diverse workplace will ensure your team members curb their personal biases and question their assumptions. If you ensure your organization also has inclusive practices so all employees feel their voice is valid, your team will be smarter and ultimately, more successful, no matter your goal.

Focus on facts, become more innovative

 The more diverse the team, the more likely they are to re-evaluate facts and remain objective, says Harvard Business Review in the article "Why Diverse Teams are Smarter." By breaking up the homogeneity in the workplace, you will allow your employees to

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Diverse Teams are More Successful!
by John Cable
Commentary

become more aware of their own possible biases: stale or entrenched ways of thinking that could cause them to miss key information and cause errors.

Different problem-solving styles help people engage with complex situations

So, how does this function in your organization? Every time you put in a new reporting system, you will need everyone at the table, and you will need to listen to expertise from different levels from within the organization. For example, most executives who manage functional units do not see what is going on at the accounts payable clerk's desk. That is a missed opportunity. The knowledge of the person who is doing the work is different from that of the person who is working at the theoretical level.

Failing to represent all users at the table alongside the executives could mean you are functioning as a unit in a silo. You are working hard, but you do not include the other units around you. You get into a project without talking to the others, and then bring them in later in the process when things start going wrong. Bringing in *all* the right people at *all* levels can pre-empt a real disaster.

Consider the people involved who are not the same as the larger group. Those with a diverse educational experience might have other ideas as to how to approach problem solving. That means it might make perfect sense for an artist, a psychologist, and a furniture designer to be part of a team of engineers working on a project at NASA.

The people who are not in the field will not have preconceptions, and they will ask beginner questions that bring solutions. You do not want all like-minded, like-trained people in the meeting. We have constructive ways to think about diversity that allow us to see the value in people, so when you work with others who think differently, you have to slow down and listen. Their perspective might be wholly different, but it is still valuable and it is worth the time to see where it might lead. Their experience will not be like the others', but it might contribute to a better solution.

The bottom line is that nonhomogeneous teams produce better work than homogenous ones do! The evidence is clear.

The next University of Maryland *VIRTUAL* Project Management Symposium will be May 5-6, 2022. The event will feature 4 keynote speakers and 55 individual sessions in 5 concurrent tracks. Event information will be available September 1, 2021. If you want access to all 57 of the session recordings from the 2021 event at very low cost, visit the 2021 Project Management Symposium website to register.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue XII – December 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Diverse Teams are More Successful!
by John Cable
Commentary

About the Author

John Cable

Director, Project Management Center for Excellence
University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

John Cable is Director of the Project Management Center for Excellence in the A. James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland, where he has been a professor and teacher of several graduate courses in project management. With more than 1,300 seats filled annually with students from many countries, including more than 40 PhD students, the program is one of the largest graduate program in project management at a major university in the United States.

John Cable served in the newly formed U.S. Department of Energy in 1980, where he was involved with developing energy standards for buildings, methods for measuring energy consumption, and managing primary research in energy conservation. As an architect and builder, Mr. Cable founded and led John Cable Associates in 1984, a design build firm. In 1999 he was recruited by the University of Maryland's Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering to create and manage a graduate program in project management. In his role as founder and director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at Maryland, the program has grown to offer two undergraduate minors, 3 master's degrees, and a doctoral program. Information about the Project Management Center for Project Management at the University of Maryland can be found at www.pm.umd.edu.

In 2002, PMI formed the Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Educational Programs (GAC). Mr. Cable was appointed to that inaugural board where he served as vice chair. In 2006, he was elected as chairman, a role he held through 2012. As Chair of the PMI GAC, John led the accreditation of 86 project management educational programs at 40 institutions in 15 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Asia Pacific Region. John was awarded PMI's 2012 Distinguished Contribution Award for his leadership at the GAC. He can be contacted at jcable@umd.edu.

To view other works by John Cable, visit his author showcase in the PM World Library at https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/john-cable/