



Leading Diverse Teams Effectively

Mark is worried.

Four years ago, he led a smaller team of two members who balanced each other's strengths well. Their discussions and debates were productive and healthy.

Now, as the business has grown, his team has expanded to seven members. While the discussions remain lively, Mark has noticed a concerning trend. Whenever he invites the full team to brainstorm over a business problem, three of his team members—whom he has labeled the ‘risk-takers’—are always eager to share new ideas and explore unconventional approaches. This group consistently sits together during meetings, at lunch, weekly reviews, and even on field visits.

Interestingly, Mark has observed similar behaviour in the other four members, the ‘risk-averse’ group. Recently, he’s noticed that they are less willing to collaborate and exchange ideas with the risk-takers. It seems that sharing information between these two groups requires frequent reminders. Additionally, the risk-takers tend to take credit for the team’s successes, which complicates matters further.

Mark's concern deepens as he realises the potential impact this divide could have on the team's effectiveness.

What is a 'Diverse team'?

Simply put, it is a group of individuals with unique personalities, unique strengths, unique backgrounds, and unique lived experiences. The differences show up in their way of thinking, working styles, problem-solving approaches and business opinions.

Diverse teams are valuable because when uniquely gifted people work together, they can:

- **Spark** better creative ideas (to build new products / new services / expand the business)
- **Understand & relate** to different types of customer profiles
- **Brainstorm** on business problems collectively
- **Aid** each other in learn new things / new methods / new technologies

Consider a diverse team like a toolbox. If you only have ten hammers, you can only address problems related to nails.

However, if your toolbox includes one hammer, one screwdriver, one utility knife, one power drill, one crowbar, one set of pliers, and four other tools, imagine all the different tasks you could tackle!



Working in a 'Homogeneous Team'

Many of us prefer the comfort of being around people who think and talk like us.

In such groups, we often find that individuals tend to agree with one another more frequently.

Because everyone views business data and problems in the same way, communication can feel easier, and decision-making may seem quicker.

While homogeneous teams can be easier to work with, research indicates that they are less effective at achieving complex departmental goals and key performance indicators (KPIs) as well as resolving intricate business issues compared to diverse teams. Experts suggest that this difference will become even more pronounced in the future workplace, where human intelligence and artificial intelligence (AI) will coexist side by side.



Leading a Diverse Team: Challenges for the Leader

While handling a diverse team, leaders have to anticipate 'communication gaps' between different members.

These 'gaps', if ignored, have the potential to adversely impact the internal dynamics of the team.

Leaders must find a balance between team members with a variety of working styles—

- Some members prefer structure while some thrive in flexibility
- Some members are introverted while others are extroverted
- Some members want to 'try and learn' new ways of doing things; while others prefer to stick to 'tried-and-tested' methods
- Some members prefer a one-on-one note of appreciation (to feel valued); others would like a public applause.

The list is endless.

Building trust requires additional effort, especially when many leaders view the team through their unconscious biases.

Managing conflicts can also be a challenge as people with diverse perspectives naturally create more disagreements.

Disagreements in a diverse team can be healthy, but research shows they can also become toxic – when the leader fails to steer the conversation effectively.

Modern-day skillsets for Leaders to get the best out of a Diverse Team: What do experts say?

- Modern leaders should be able to **harness an inclusive communication style**; as well as encourage all team members to adopt the same.
- Leaders need to **stay alert and look out for instances of 'groupism'** – those moments where smaller groups within the team create their own 'tiny comfort zones' and refuse to collaborate with the other groups in the same team!
- Successful leaders practice "**cultural humility**" – staying curious about individual perspectives (rather than assuming they already know how the team is going to respond/react).
- Leaders need to **develop group facilitation skills** that transform diverse viewpoints into innovative solutions.
- Leaders should learn how to **create psychological safety** where team members from all backgrounds feel comfortable in sharing their opinions without fear of judgment.
- Above everything else, a leader must **build true inclusion** by ensuring everyone feels valued and heard.



Conclusion

Research shows that a well-led diverse team combines different ideas, thought-patterns and lived-experiences to create powerful business innovations (which homogeneous groups can never hope to achieve).

Mark is worried that the ‘risk-averse’ group in his team does not get along well with the ‘risk-taker’ group in the team. But the key to unlock the true potential of Mark’s team is to get both the groups to work ‘towards’ each other, and not ‘against’ each other!

While diversity does bring personality differences and potential conflicts, **skilled leaders can transform these differences into powerful innovation drivers.**

This effort (required to handle diverse teams effectively) yields significant rewards in team productivity, group problem-solving, and organisational success!



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