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► **Understanding behavioural ethics**

by Tim Skelton

► **Offshoring and firm innovation**

by Justin Jansen

► **Why industry standards are pivotal**

by Henk de Vries and Jan van den Ende

► **Informed discretion in performance evaluations**

by Marcel van Rinsum

► **How to boost creativity within diverse teams**

by Inga J. Hoever, Daan van Knippenberg, Wendy P. van Ginkel and Harry G. Barkema

► **Business cycle fluctuations and consumption behaviour**

by Bram Van den Bergh

► **The role of non-executive directors in Dutch firms**

by Michiel Wolfswinkel



How to boost creativity within diverse teams

by Inga J. Hoever, Daan van Knippenberg, Wendy P. van Ginkel and Harry G. Barkema

Researchers and managers alike have often portrayed diversity as a key driver of team creativity. However, recent findings suggest that getting team members to take their fellow workers' perspective is essential to the process of benefiting from diversity.

Working teams come in all shapes and sizes and members often differ in many ways – different functional assignments, educational backgrounds, native languages and even the attitude of workers to achieving their tasks, to name a few. However, if carefully managed and nurtured, diversity can be exploited positively to raise creativity. Our research has identified perspective taking between team members as a key mechanism that helps diverse teams be more creative.

Our findings begin from the hypothesis that diversity of knowledge and information within a team offers no guarantee of higher creativity. In order for teams to realise this potential, they have to adopt an inclusive approach to discussion and information, so that team members not only share their information but also make sure that all of it is heard and considered.

Our research shows that this inclusive approach to discussion is much more likely when team members

are willing and able to take each other's perspective.

Information elaboration

By encouraging perspective taking among the members of diverse teams, leaders can therefore help members to engage in a style of discussion that facilitates creativity. Some have suggested that information sharing or task-related conflict is important in this regard. In contrast, our detailed observation of the actual team discussions shows that neither one of these mechanisms is sufficient.

Instead, in addition to merely sharing information or having conflicting opinions, a more active and inclusive process of "information elaboration" is crucial. Information elaboration means that team members not only passively receive the information but also actively discuss it and connect it to their own knowledge and viewpoints.

Perspective taking and information elaboration may require extra efforts from team members, but there are very

practical things research suggests that managers can do to increase the odds of success or make it easier for team members go the extra mile.

First steps

The first step is to compose your team carefully. Differences in status or power may make it harder for people to take each other's perspective and discuss information in a way that incorporates everyone's input. Conversely, achieving a mix of members with overlapping experiences and knowledge and who thus speak a common language facilitates perspective taking and information elaboration.

In terms of work mentality, having individuals who are not solely focused on "getting the job done" but are inquisitive and want to understand how and why things work is also important. It is to be expected that workers will not only have very different tasks from one another but also varying qualitative approaches to their tasks. Encouraging a cognitive mind-set where team members seek to understand one another's tasks and not just the end result is essential to benefiting from these differences.

Right conditions

Apart from choosing the right mix of people for a team, leaders can



also create supportive conditions and learning experiences for team members. Task rotation and shadowing of team members are just two of the measures that managers could and should consider in order to promote the process of perspective taking as they make the viewpoints of their teammates more accessible.

Leaders should aim to instil a climate of confidence within the team where members will display a healthy curiosity in one another's respective tasks and how they seek to achieve results. This appreciation of diversity as a valuable resource may ultimately benefit the creativity of the team as a whole. In both respects, leaders can serve as important role models and set the tone for the entire team.

Leadership intervention

The manager who achieves this will find him or herself with a team where members socialise and interact more

constructively. Our findings show that encouraging perspective taking and setting up a collaborative, information elaboration-based approach is helpful for newly formed teams.

Although it may also have benefits for teams that have a history together, the impact of leader interventions might be largest at the outset of a team project when group dynamics are still evolving. The diverse knowledge and viewpoints tied to the many ways in which team members may differ will then become an asset to the team, rather than an obstacle that could potentially hold teams back.

Leading a team is a matter of enabling a series of individuals for a collective benefit. By encouraging each individual to put themselves in the shoes of their fellow co-workers, the team unit will be the ultimate beneficiary of helping team members to see the world through the eyes of their colleagues. ■

This article draws its inspiration from the paper *Fostering Team Creativity: Perspective Taking as Key to Unlocking Diversity's Potential* by Inga J. Hoever, Daan van Knippenberg, Wendy P. van Ginkel, and Harry G. Barkema. The paper was published in *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 9 July 2012.

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