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Abstract	We will have an entirely homogenous, unquestioning decision-making process in an organisation that will not be open to any new ideas. This can be disastrous because as businesses become increasingly global, diverse and accelerated, it becomes ever more crucial for top management to understand, appreciate and tap into how different groups of people with different orientation and talents will behave and can contribute differently to achieving the organisation's goals and united vision. This, then, is the power of what is now recognised globally as 'workforce diversity'.

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Building on Diversity

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Building on Ethnic, Cultural and Religious Diversity

Remember old sayings like "birds of a feather, flock together" and "if you are on the ground gobbling with the turkeys, you cannot soar with the eagles"? None can be more apt when it comes to people within organisations in all sectors. Many bosses tend to hire people who are on the same wavelength and have similar interests and idiosyncrasies, overlooking those who think or act differently. But these are the people who may be able to contribute different viewpoints, ideas and compensating strengths to the organisation. When we recruit too many people in our own image and biases, not only do we replicate the same strengths, we accentuate our common weaknesses as well.

We will have an entirely homogenous, unquestioning decision-making process in an organisation that will not be open to any new ideas. This can be disastrous because as businesses become increasingly global, diverse and accelerated, it becomes ever more crucial for top management to understand, appreciate and tap into how different groups of people with different orientation and talents will behave and can contribute differently to achieving the organisation's goals and united vision. This, then, is the power of what is now recognised globally as 'workforce diversity'.

Creativity in diversity

The challenge for top management in a globalised economy is to make workforce diversity a key tool and enabler for the organisation. The dynamic organisation of the future will have key human catalysts to create and drive innovation in their organisation as opposed to making everyone boringly uniform and standard. Diversity starts with top management's appreciation for all the different perspectives, views and ideas that can be garnered, because different people can observe the same event or go through an experience and emerge with very different conclusions and solutions.

We are able to learn from those who are different from us if we keep an open and unbiased mindset because all great discoveries and innovation come from gaining insights from our counterparts operating in their respective paradigms. It is when we interact with people of another gender, race, culture, education or even age, that we begin to learn a lot better and see things in a better perspective. And it is through this process of understanding others that we best understand ourselves even more.

Diversity makes business, social and economic sense as well. In a report "Best Practices in Diversity Management" published by the International Personnel Management Association, the benchmarking committee found that *"diversity efforts in the workplace facilitate the exchange of new perspectives, improve problem solving by inviting different ideas, and create a respectful, accepting work environment, all of which make good business sense."*

The report concluded that proactive diversity management will have a positive impact on high performance when senior management teams comprise of a diversity of ages, ethnicity and gender. It also highlighted that a diverse workforce can also improve organisational productivity, ramp up product development, and spark creativity as well as innovation - all of which are so vital today for long-term success in this ever-competitive global economy.

But what is diversity management? In his book "Beyond Race and Gender", Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas, one of America's most respected authorities on diversity issues, defined it as "a comprehensive managerial process for developing an environment that works for all employees." For an organisation, appreciating diversity means making a conscious effort in introducing gender, race or cultural balance across all levels.

Workforce diversity as a competitive advantage

Having a diverse workforce means managers will need to understand cultural, ethnic and gender issues, and address sensitivities and differences when they hire, train and retain people. For multinational corporations, being ethnically diverse is seen as a competitive advantage because they now possess a better chance of tapping into the different and emerging markets. This is why Malaysia is a preferred regional base. With our multi-ethnic languages, we can communicate with half the population of the world. We should build on this inherent ethnic and language diversity to prepare our next generation of global leaders.

Key to successful integration

But diversity is not without its risks and problems. As it increases, so does the challenge of effective integration. Managers must preside over this sea of conflicting loyalties and agendas and manage them in such a way that diversity can be turned into a sustainable competitive advantage. Research has shown that companies that have successfully navigated from a monoculture to a diverse workforce appear to have taken all or some of the following five steps:

1. **Being mission-, goal- and values-driven.** While debates may be good, one should not get sidetracked. They must be based on a set of clear values, goals and priorities. CEOs and management should play a proactive guiding role, helping to direct participants' collective attention to a shared concern or goal. Let the workers do the thinking and talking.
2. **Promoting openness and transparency.** The level of trust in heterogeneous teams may not be as high as those that comprise like-minded people because the former lack common background. Internal debate and sharing therefore must be encouraged and not punished. Information should flow freely and be shared willingly across the entire organisation. Often, in a constructive dialogue, it

is not a matter of who is right or wrong but what is right for the organisation.

3. **Paying people right, based on performance.** Put your money where your mouth is. A fair compensation structure, which includes incentives based on objectives and measurable performance benchmarks aligned with the organisation's core strategy, is essential to maintaining harmony in a diverse workforce.
4. **Emphasising collaborative teamwork.** Teamwork skills seldom come naturally. They vary enormously from individual to individual. Coaching and mentoring can make the difference. For example, the CEO of a major electronics multinational corporation recognised that the marketing department needed to play a bigger role. While the marketing manager possessed functional skills and knowledge, he was not a natural team player. As a former tennis champion, he was used to playing solo. With a 360-degree appraisal, which included perspectives from senior and junior colleagues and peers, his limitations were identified. Personal coaching from the CEO helped him to collaborate more effectively with his peers and subordinates. At heart, he still prefers to play singles tennis but now he is able to learn to play an entirely different ball game - working with others. We may not be able to change what we see, but we can always change the ways we see things.
5. **Treating others as you would like to be treated.** As Dr Stephen Covey puts it, "seek first to understand before being understood". Step out of yourself and put yourself in the other person's shoes before you react or jump to conclusions. In business and in life, we have to make judgements and decisions and invariably, we will make mistakes. We should have the courage to own up, apologise and learn from our mistakes. This practice will create an open, respectful and positive work culture in which people will want to share and contribute to organisational achievement and success.

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