“When Team Members’ Values Differ: The Moderating Role of Team Leadership”

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Publication: Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Volume 114, Issue 1, pages 25–36, January 2011
DIVERSITY HAS LONG BEEN THOUGHT to be synonymous with differences in gender or ethnic origin. Companies have tried to harness diversity as an important attribute used to shape a company's overall identity and culture. But diversity also includes an individual's personal values, such as work ethic and moral compass. Recognizing that every manager and employee brings their own personal set of beliefs to the workplace, this research study set out to explore how different values encourage harmony or discordance in an organization, and how to manage these differences within teams.

Over a 10-month period, Andrew Knight and his collaborators evaluated the impact of two different leadership styles on teams with high levels of values diversity:

Task-focused leaders deliver clear, structured direction to the team, with defined roles and responsibilities. Specific instructions, tasks, and required deliverables are clear to all team members and assigned directly by the task-focused leader.

Person-focused leaders show warmth toward team members, accept individual team members’ perspectives, and encourage participative team decision-making. Team members’ thoughts and opinions factor into the decision process for person-focused leaders.

Knight’s team tested the impact of each of these leadership approaches on teams taking part in an American national service program. Individuals were randomly assigned to teams, forcing individuals to work with others who may not share their same values and beliefs.

Over the course of 10 months, team members completed a range of tasks together, such as environmental work and disaster relief.

The results of survey-based data collected over three separate evaluation periods showed that person-focused leadership behaviors exacerbated team conflict for teams high in values diversity. Alternatively, task-focused leadership—that is, providing highly structured instructions and clearly defining roles—reduced conflict and enhanced team effectiveness.

These results have real-world applications. “The common prescription today for how leaders should handle diversity is to embrace it and encourage people to express themselves. While on target for some forms of diversity, our findings show that when it comes to values-based differences, leaders need to provide greater structure to prevent differing, deeply held belief systems from shattering a team,” Knight explains.

“One cookie-cutter approach to diversity does not best serve any team or organization. Leaders need to ask ‘diversity in what?’ A team might be 100% white and female, but under the surface there might be significant differences in how team members see the world. Managing this values diversity may require a leader to take an active and directive approach in organizing the team’s work.” — Andrew Knight

Knight’s research findings suggest that a more measured leadership approach would better serve the team when faced with values diversity. Clear team structure, roles, and focus on individual responsibilities would reduce conflict in teams faced with high values diversity.

Key Takeaways for Managers

- Diversity encompasses more than just gender, ethnicity, age, or nationality. A leader must understand values diversity—differences in people’s core underlying beliefs—to build a harmonious organization or team.

- Team leaders should understand values diversity to determine the leadership style that will best foster team effectiveness. The same approach is not appropriate for every situation.

- Task-focused leadership based on clear roles, targeted deliverables, and understandable objectives will better serve teams high in values diversity. Person-focused leadership that closely attends to individual team members’ unique and differing perspectives may have undesirable effects in teams high in values diversity.

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