

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

– Cognitive Diversity

Course Notes



UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY – Cognitive Diversity

Introduction

Our exploration so far has taken us through several different demographic diversity characteristics. That's to say who we are and how we identify through either external characteristics such as our ethnicity, health conditions we may have, our appearance or other aspects that are central to the core of who we are as individuals, including our gender identity, our sexual or romantic orientation or our religious beliefs.

The other side of diversity is our Cognitive Diversity. This is formed from a range of elements that help us to understand, process and have the core values that we do. It is the Cognitive Diversity that makes us all unique from the way we were brought up, the experiences that we have had, the functional roles we hold and the sectors we occupy professionally, and the people we hold closest to us, both in our hearts and our minds. Those influences all have a huge part in making us think about the world and the people in it in the way that we do.

ACTION: We're now going to explore a handful of those personal aspects and as we go into each one, think about how each make you the unique person you are. Has there ever been an advantage to you? Or has it cost you an opportunity in your life either personally, or professionally?

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INTROVERTS VS EXTROVERTS

Not everything is visible or easily understood. Take our working preferences. Some people will work brilliantly in a group and really thrive off the energy they may get in a meeting, continuing to feel invigorated by different ideas. Some will find it harder because of how they are wired, so back-to-back meetings may make them feel drained and so they will end their day needing to recharge.

We sometimes confuse the term Extrovert and Introvert with people who are either socially confident or shy – but it's actually all about how we **DERIVE** our energy. Extroverts will get their energy from other people and therefore tasks like meetings or social networking events, team off-sites and relationship building will feel easier and more natural because their energy will be increased – whereas introverts in the same situation will often feel depleted. But some of the indirect benefits may be because people who are extroverted put themselves forward for more additional activity and the result is their managers spot this contribution and they are more likely to be offered additional opportunities or promotions.

So, when you are thinking about creating teams, think about how you can have a mix of those who are introverted as well as extroverted and establish a set of ground rules for how this will operate in a way that can reap the benefits of the two different thinking styles. When doing so, consider how other styles such as reactive vs reflective thinkers, risk averse vs risk takers can also be balanced.

REMEMBER: Some people may appear to be more productive or perform better purely because the traditional ways of working support them to be so.

ACTION: Think about how you best work? In a hybrid environment do you find yourself working better or worse than when you're in the office? Are there certain situations or environments where you find yourself more drained than others?

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DIVERSITY OF EXPERIENCE

Some may say that the diversity of experience that we have is possibly the broadest of all the different diversity characteristics. Part of this will come from the opportunities you had when you were growing up, and the environment in which you grew up in. For example, did you live with both your biological parents or were you raised in a different household environment? What was your socioeconomic background or class? Other influences include the type of school you went to; did certain teachers not get on with you so well which affected how you thought about the subject they taught; did you go to university and if so, what type of university was it and what did you study there?

But the above kind of experience doesn't stop at our formative years. It's something that continues throughout our lifetime. And these may well happen at both a tiny and a large scale. For example, we may experience some trauma which makes us think of situations in a completely different way; we may switch sectors which means we can use our previous experience and apply it in a different context; or we may travel and view things from different perspectives.

These differences are what help us to continually grow. And being receptive to those who have different experiences and therefore different perspectives can be critical for us to fully engage with as many staff, customers, or stakeholders that we may not have previously reached before.

ACTION: What is it that makes you different from the person closest to you? Not from a demographic perspective but a Cognitive perspective? As a result have you been able to experience a different perspective during a conversation which you might not have previously thought of before?

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DIVERSITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Think about when you've had to write your CV or résumé for a new job. How do you go about it? Do you write down all the different things that you've done? How did you actually get the chance to put all of those achievements, tasks or responsibilities down? Was it because someone gave you the opportunity to prove yourself in your role? Or, were there opportunities you didn't take because they didn't feel safe enough for you to?

This is one of the critical failures that organisations tend to have when looking to bring people into their company. We look to purely what people have done in the past. But quite often, within the roles and responsibilities those individuals have been assigned, those individuals were not in control of what it is they did at work or how they have been able to be perceived.

With people at the start of their careers the difference in previous opportunity can be vast. Some young people are able to pursue extra-curricular activities at University or do unpaid internships, which might be more eye-catching on a CV than for example, low-paid restaurant or retail work performed as a student – which could actually have been a good source of knowledge about how businesses function at the ground level.

ACTION:

Are there times when you either gave someone a particular opportunity or received an opportunity at work to demonstrate something that they or you now see as a key achievement? Why did you choose that person or what do you think was the reason that you received such an opportunity yourself? Was it the first time that had happened from that particular individual?

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DIVERSITY OF NETWORK

One of the biggest challenges we face is our natural pull towards people who look like us, think like us or share the same experiences as us. Each of us will make an assessment of what we have in common when we meet someone for the first time that will subconsciously look to invest into a potential connection, or to pull away from it.

This is known as Affinity bias, and we often see this in the people we hire perhaps attending the same academic institutions or having previously worked for the same companies as we may have earlier in our career. Or choosing friends because of the music we like in common or the genres of films we're interested in; or perhaps the fact we find it easier to connect with someone because they've already been introduced to us by someone already in our network.

This is simple to understand. Those little elements of connectivity between people who are similar to us, help to build relationships. But it's also likely to find us reinforcing what we already believe as our network is likely to think and operate in similar ways. Again, this isn't always a bad thing, but it does mean that if we don't seek to broaden our groups, we will tend to think and believe the same narrow things. Which means that when information that conflicts with what we already believe to be true is presented, we find it much harder to trust and we do not have the same confidence in that source.

REMEMBER: If the people we associate with all think like us and have similar experiences to us, we might find it harder to have a fuller understanding of how others experience the world.

ACTION: Which demographics or experiences are more prominent in your professional network? What could you do to increase that diversity to get different thoughts and viewpoints in?

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THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

When organisations undertake Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, this is mainly done from a political viewpoint from the Global North (i.e. The USA, Canada, Europe, Russia, Israel, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand). Does that mean diversity and inclusion doesn't exist in other countries, or it's not important or are they better at it than in the Global North? Of course not. But it will present differently.

Some countries may choose to focus on what their legislation enables them to, so it may be that it's uncomfortable or culturally more complex to talk about certain demographics such as education or LGBT+ issues. When it comes to ethnicity, people with a Western perspective might often reduce an entire nation, or region, down to one ethnicity – for example, Chinese, Indian, or Nigerian – when in fact each of those countries contains multiple different ethnicities, languages, religions and cultures.

This can be even more complex when working with multinational organisations or with clients based in different countries or cultures. If we're based in a country where being LGBT+ or having a non-Cisgender identity is criminalised, do we find it easy dealing with the people of such countries that have a different legal framework? Or where certain disabilities (especially surrounding mental ill health or learning disabilities) are stigmatised and not talked about? How can we have an approach which feels right for both parties?

The best thing to do here is to remember that just because someone has an opposing or different thought or perspective, that doesn't make them automatically bad across every dimension. We can't always expect different jurisdictions to understand our point of view. But we can do things in a way which is kind and supports the underrepresented folk in our own workplaces when they encounter something we wouldn't permit in our own business.

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BINARY OR CONTINUUM

In societies in general, we are seeing more polarisation of viewpoints. This can sometimes feel incredibly divisive, and that people have to choose either one side or the other. That one might support diversity initiatives, or not. Or believe in equalising the playing field or not. But like so much in our lives, these are not ultimately yes or no issues.

The response may be different depending on who's making the assessment. Someone might be inclusive in one form and yet unsupportive of diversity in another dimension. It may be dependent on the day and what else is happening in somebody's lives at that moment and the invisible stresses they might be under.

Nobody is ever going to be perfect in how they approach Diversity. But just because they believe (or used to believe) in a particular or opposing view to your own approach to Diversity, that doesn't automatically mean everything they believe, or do, is invalidated. We all have the ability to change, or be exposed to things which become more important to us.

In a similar way, we think of people as either kind or unkind. But in truth (and especially when it comes to Diversity) what is kind to one person may be completely unkind to another, or the needs may not have even been considered. We need to find a way that we can continue to increase our levels of kindness and appreciation and support for diversity in our lives. And if there are days where it's not as positive as we had hoped, we can try and pick up from where we left off or find ways to regain that previous perception. Because there will nearly always be a way that we can do better.

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WHAT MAKES DIVERSITY SO DIFFICULT TO TALK ABOUT (PART 1)

Improving diversity seems to make a lot of sense. However, the reality is we often shy away from the conversation for several reasons. Some of these reasons are:

- The pace of change, especially of terminology and external events, can sometimes feel incredibly fast. (Between us recording these videos and you watching them now, new developments could have made something that we say here seem outdated!) And sometimes that change can feel uncomfortable, especially if we do not know exactly what it is driving the shift or can't relate to it because it doesn't directly affect us.
- Most people will wake up in the morning and intrinsically think of themselves as inherently good. However, we may find ourselves getting something wrong which can make us question whether we are as good as we perceive ourselves to be and therefore, we tend to withdraw from the discussion.
- We only know what we know, so entering into a conversation where we are completely unaware that what we are about to say might be exclusionary can sometimes feel like a difficult path to navigate in case we inadvertently offend.
- When the people around us share similar characteristics and experiences, we are more likely to not even recognise that these challenges exist for people with different experiences, and this leads to what is classed as groupthink.
- Some people have what Professor Carol Dweck calls a Fixed mindset, where getting something wrong leads them to thinking they're a failure, rather than using it to develop themselves. The other side of this is a Growth mindset where we can use mistakes we make about diversity to learn from others and see any failure as essential for learning.

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WHAT MAKES DIVERSITY SO DIFFICULT TO TALK ABOUT (PART 2)

Improving diversity seems to make a lot of sense. However, the reality is we often shy away from the conversation for several reasons. Some of these reasons are:

- There will be occasions where we have to reflect on our own privileges and acknowledge them in order to see why diversity is important and beneficial. Having privilege may feel like an accusation that we've had an easy life or we haven't faced any difficulties in getting to the places we have. But the real definition of privilege, in this context, is that someone will often have been free of a certain kind of negative impact that others have been subjected to, purely based on who they are.
- In a busy and continuously shifting workplace, there are so many priorities competing for attention and focus. Some of these will seem critical and might temporarily displace focus on the work of diversity. And because the work does not always give a visible result immediately, some leaders may well choose to slide it down the list of organisational priorities.
- Those who are highly inclusive and supportive of environments being more diverse, can often find themselves in discussions or confrontations with those who do not share the same views and are therefore labelled as difficult or problematic.
- Much of the time, we can feel overwhelmed about topics we have little direct knowledge of. When we undertake such things with good intent, we may not end up with our desired outcome and find that the impact we've made generates a feeling of failure, so we give up. However, the more we walk away, the harder this problem is going to get down the line.

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DIVERSITY IN OUR MEDIA

Throughout history, all forms of communication have tended towards storytelling. Because most of the stories recounted are told from the perspective of people of a certain demographic, there's a natural connection to those from the same demographic. Think about whether there are certain nationalities or even just physical appearances that play good characters vs villains in Film or TV programmes; or whether we only recognise a certain ethnic group for being successful in sports or entertainment; or why it's only in recent years that we hear of a wider breadth of women in history and the crucial roles they played in shaping where we are today.

Because this information comes to us on such a regular basis but in such a subliminal way, it conditions how we approach things and how we see specific issues or people. Even from something as simple as the language that we use on a day-to-day basis. Because the language we hear used in a sitcom or see about a particular political party in a newspaper or read a story about someone from the LGBT+ community; or hear about in a podcast regarding a specific health condition, will affect our understanding of those issues.

These signals that we are constantly fed throughout our daily lives are so small yet so frequent, that when we do interact with people who belong to those demographics, we expect them to operate in the same way. The result is often that they have to do considerably more than some others to get the same level of recognition for their professional knowledge or experience or capability. It's so important to overcome what we believe to be true based on a few of their characteristics and actually take these people for who they are and what they can contribute to overcome the bias instilled by the media.

REMEMBER: All the information we consume will come with a bias and that it will be presented in a way which is not impartial.

ACTION: Can you think of a recent advert or film where an underrepresented demographic was portrayed according to an outdated stereotype?

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THE FUTURE OF DIVERSITY & AI

With the increasing rise in focus on Diversity and Inclusion in our workplaces, organisations are finding new ways to use technology to help provide more equity for those who are underrepresented and also the growing number of demographics that would benefit from Diversity and Inclusion initiatives. However, these can come with some challenges too.

Part of the difficulty that some people have is the continuous growth of who is served under the diversity and inclusion banner. We've explored a number of these people in the opening of this course, but this always evolves over time. For example, some governments have recently included those who grew up in the care system to be considered a characteristic that cannot be discriminated against. Like any subject matter or function in a business, this work is continually evolving and therefore we need an agile approach. The work that an organisation, a community or society does towards improving Diversity and Inclusion is something that we cannot do just once and then consider it complete.

In the same way, there's a world of new solutions available for helping people and organisations to eliminate day-to-day bias. This includes a wide range of software solutions that can identify when the language we are using could be more inclusive, or how we could improve certain things such as elements of the recruitment process. And there are products that help us measure progress on certain KPIs. These can all be useful, but new technology also has its pitfalls. For example, there have been class action suits against organisations that use software for workers to clock or log in to their shift using facial recognition software that disproportionately did not recognise who the people were if they happened to be ethnically diverse.

REMEMBER: Artificial Intelligence will emphasise what you are already providing as the intelligence for it to learn from. The way we can overcome this is by ensuring that the people inputting to these technological solutions don't all share the same characteristics and experiences. Finding ways to include more people and ask questions in a safe and respectful way will help ensure more criteria and scenarios are included so then we can make such products appeal to a bigger, broader customer base.

ACTION: Are there processes in your business which are being automated that might not favour certain demographics? If there was a way to use technological solutions to help this, what would you need to consider to solve the problem?

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THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

We can view diversity's contribution to our workplaces through a number of perspectives. These can be a broad range of positive contributions along with ways that can negatively impact those in the workplace. They include:

- Numerous studies that show the positive effects of increased diversity. Whether that is an increase in commercial performance, innovation revenues, EBIT (Earnings Before Interest and Taxes) decision making, customer acquisition, employee engagement, the research from numerous industry leaders across the globe shows that more diversity (especially in higher levels of seniority in organisations) relates to better business performance.
- Through engaging a broader range of people, we are more likely to be able to identify business challenges and threats. Recent failures include firms not spotting advertising campaigns that were racially insensitive, creating products such as hand dryers or soap dispensers which don't recognise all ethnicities, designing environments which are not fully accessible to those who have physical health conditions. These avoidable failures directly constrain the profitability of an organisation and have a disastrous effect on brand perception.
- When employees are more engaged, they are more productive. But we have to ensure that we are engaging all those in our workforce and not just focusing on those who are more visible, prominent, and better represented. The data we need to collect ought to reflect this. It's not just about the percentage composition of our workforce, but deeper and harder questions, such as: are certain demographics leaving the organisation sooner or taking longer to get promoted?

REMEMBER: All the research points to better business performance and decisions being made in organisations that are the most diverse.

ACTION: Write down a list of areas where your business does well at acknowledging the importance of diversity. And what are the challenges for your organisation to be even more diverse than it is. What could your organisation do collectively to better understand the power of diversity?

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THE CASES FOR DIVERSITY

As we've seen, there are many reasons for us to harness the benefits that a diverse environment can bring. But no matter how compelling the argument seems to us, it might seem we aren't getting our message or advocacy across to those around us. Why is it that others cannot see our perspective?

This is all about how we're communicating, and just as relevant for any type of stakeholder engagement in the business. It's not about what is important to us as individuals, it's about what's important to those who we're trying to engage with. Thinking about the best way we're communicating the information is really important. Three key cases for Diversity include:

- **The Ethical Case:** Many people believe the work we should do around Diversity shouldn't need any data to support it because it's just the right thing to do, it's morally correct. This is best used for people who openly display behaviours demonstrating empathy, social justice, and sustainability. The best data to use to reinforce this will be societal statistics (look for data around Human Rights or studies from third sector organisations).
- **The Strategic Case:** Often people understand that this work can add value, but need a better understanding of how it can be undertaken effectively. This is most relevant for people who want to get the best from their people or teams. The most useful data would be to look at things that focus on leadership (look for data from places such as Forbes or Harvard Business Review).
- **The Commercial Case:** This is sometimes seen as the most controversial case since it's when people want to know exactly what the investment will be and what financial returns they can expect. The most useful data here would be from business statistics (look for studies conducted at places like EY, Deloitte, Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey, PwC).
- We don't present any of these as exclusively right or better than the other. They just provide different levers so as to connect with the people we want to bring along with us on the journey.

REMEMBER: Different people will resonate with different reasons to undertake Diversity work. We need to find the right reasons for them, not us, in order to bring them along with us.

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HELPFUL BEHAVIOURS TO ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY (Part 1)

We've looked at a variety of Diversity characteristics and some of the challenges that surround them. We'd like to finish with some practical applications that will be helpful across all dimensions of Diversity.

- **Diversifying our knowledge:** We can undertake our own research through reading books and blogs, watching videos or films, or listening to podcasts of lived experiences from those who are different to us and therefore have different opinions and thoughts. By being active and not sitting back, we can ensure that we are not burdening those disproportionately affected in our workplaces and social networks by leaving all the work to them. When you consume this content, ask yourself “how would I feel if this impacted me because of some random aspect of my physical appearance or background that was out of my choice and control?”
- **Everyone is Just One.** We often use the various demographic labels to help us better understand people and what may be important to them. However, we can't take the information we've learned from one person and transpose it onto everyone else who shares the same characteristic. An individual person-centred approach (focusing on who they are and what their needs are, rather than making assumptions) is the best way for us to build connections with individuals as this results in better engagement. That also goes for anything we've learned from this course. Some of the terms or phrases, may not necessarily be those that are favoured by other people within that same demographic. However we wanted to make sure we have an approach that works for all.
- One of the benefits of diversity is that we can get a **breadth of thoughts and opinions** which we may not have considered before. But no matter how demographically diverse, our group is, if we all think the same, we are not able to reap the advantages that diversity can bring to us. So, next time you're in a meeting and everyone around the table agrees with a particular idea or approach, ask yourself, have I got too many people around this table? Or do I need to change who is in this meeting? What is it that we could be missing as either an opportunity or a threat? Who else can we bring in? And once they are in the room, how can empower them to contribute to their full potential?

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HELPFUL BEHAVIOURS TO ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY (Part 2)

- We often think of certain demographics being the subject matter experts in a particular field. To broaden our knowledge, we can seek out people who are underrepresented in particular sectors and functions, so we are not constraining our thoughts to be reinforcing the biases we have been exposed to for most of our lives . So, for example, if the media in society might have left you with a stereotype of what type of person works in IT, seek out someone who defies that stereotype.
- A lot of the time, those people who are underrepresented or to use a slightly more accurate term, underestimated do not have the same opportunity to prove themselves. For example, in a team meeting, the person chairing that session may default to getting the opinions from just one or two people. If you happen to be one of the fortunate few, think is there a way you can delegate your opportunity to those who are not heard as often, and then find a way to reinforce and amplify their message by repeating it and or clarifying it and getting consensus to support their ideas and initiatives whilst giving them the credit for it.
- Another way we can grow, develop, and help to foster a more diverse environment is to work on our curiosity and our respect for others. While curiosity is an essential part of that growth mindset, we have to seek that input from others in a respectful way and not expect those who are underrepresented to tell us about their personal experiences of discrimination or prejudice. Because sometimes that can be really painful.
- In addition to this, we need be more respectful, and in a way which those around us find respectful, rather than by our own measure of respect. Every time we have different thoughts or opinions from those around us we can manage these differences in the most respectful way possible.
- The hardest bit about Diversity work is that we may well get it wrong. Acknowledge that you are going to make mistakes. For many people, it's not the original mistake that's important, it's how you choose to move on from that point where you've made that mistake. Would you get defensive and justify your perspective which will create a bigger divide? Or will you withdraw from the conversation and not take part in it anymore? Or, can you find a way to apologise in a humble way and say that you're going to learn to do better next time and ask for signposts for how you can be more inclusive in an effective manner?

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HELPFUL BEHAVIOURS TO ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY (Part 2 CONT)

As we can see, Diversity is not an easy topic for so many different reasons. One thing we need to remember is that there is no one size fits all approach to solving the issue. And we probably won't reach a fully realised solution in our working lifetimes. But we have to at least try to ensure that we are engaging everyone in our workplaces and the stakeholders that we have to enable them to be the best they can be, not the best that we permit them to be.