7 Ways to Work Well with People Who Are Not Like You

Jay Desko, Ph.D., President & CEO of The Center Consulting Group

We often hear compliments from our clients regarding The Center Consulting Group's team and culture. We really love working together and being together, but we are very different! Our team includes different ages, genders, educational levels, expressions of their faith, levels of experience, races, temperaments, ethnicities, and interests. Yet, there is no doubt we are far better because of our differences rather than in spite of them. While many people publicly embrace the desire for diversity in the workplace, deep down, we often gravitate to people who think and act like us. In addition, diversity is often viewed in very limited and often politically polarizing ways. While a leader's life can feel much easier when there is a high level of sameness, the loss of creativity and innovation is very real.

An example of this is described by Dr. Katherine Phillips when she notes a study conducted in 2014 where two Harvard University researchers looked at the ethnic identity of the authors of 1.5 million scientific papers using Thomson Reuters's Web of Science. In this study, they found that "papers written by diverse groups receive more citations and have higher impact factors than papers written by people from the same ethnic group." According to Dr. Phillips, "Being around people who are different from us makes us more creative, diligent, and hard-working."

So, why is it so hard to embrace the benefits of working with people who are not like us? One reason is life is easier when everyone thinks like us. It may not be better, but it requires less effort. For example, if one person on a team has a different opinion than the majority of others regarding a project or decision, it can cause frustration for everyone. Second, we often hold strong opinions that the way we think, work, or relate to others is the most "normal." But so do most others, and that often results in irritation and sometimes conflict. Here are seven ways to work well with people who are not like you.

1. Focus on what you have in common.

Diversity implies variety including different ideas, personalities, genders, and races. Such differences often result in greater creativity and innovation. But if too much focus is placed upon our differences, we can miss what we have in common including organizational mission, passion for our families and loved ones, and our being created in the image and likeness of God.

2. Don't assume you are "normal."

If "normal" means "majority," then you may be "normal," but that does not mean you are right. In the 1800s, the majority of the medical community didn't believe not washing their hands contributed to the death of patients. Except for Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis. He was not in the majority, but his theory was correct, and it changed the world and saved lives.

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3. Suspend premature judgment.

We have a common tendency to quickly draw conclusions when we meet people who are different than us, and the result is often not positive. This is called social bias which is sometimes unconscious to us and results from inaccurate or incomplete assumptions. This is compounded further when someone challenges our ideas or beliefs or just rubs us the wrong way. Benefiting from those who are different than us requires resisting this tendency by working intentionally to suspend judgment.

4. Take the time to know them.

Have you ever developed a negative view of someone you did not know very well, but once you got to know them, you actually liked them? It takes getting to know people to appreciate them. We are more prone to be hard on people and even dehumanize them when they are removed from us. But time together makes you realize that they are similar to you – with strengths and weaknesses, joys and losses, and dreams and challenges.

5. Appreciate the benefits of difference.

I remember reading a business article many years ago about how a major auto producer would pair people from the car design industry with creative types from other professions. It produced A LOT of tension but also resulted in some of the company's best car designs. Task people versus highly relational people. Highly structured people versus highly casual people. Differences have benefits including better decisions and improved understanding of customers or clients.

6. Avoid unproductive triggers.

If you know you are allergic to poison ivy, it is easier to stay away from it than to treat the reaction to it. This is also true when working with people who are different than us. There is little benefit in talking about things that will likely trigger unnecessary conflict – something many of us would have benefitted from especially over the past few years. This is not always possible to do, but when it is, stick with the topics that are productive, positive, and that you have in common.

7. Strive to appreciate more than tolerate.

While tolerance is an admirable trait to help contribute to a civil society, appreciation is far more beneficial. We can appreciate a person's intrinsic value even if we disagree. We can appreciate a person for his or her talents even when those talents are different than our own. And, we can appreciate a person for the unique perspectives he or she holds even when we may not agree with those perspectives.

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