Appreciating Personality Diversity

In a Nutshell

The most effective managers appreciate the diversity of their subordinates' personalities. Personality diversity can make communication and coordination of activities more difficult at times, but diversity has its advantages. Diverse groups that give the extra effort to understand and accept each other's personalities tend to produce **higher quality decisions** than groups that are either (a) homogeneous or (b) don't manage their diversity well.

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What Do Semel and Levinson Have in Common?

What do Yahoo! Inc.'s CEO, Terry Semel (in the photo on the left above), and Genentech Inc.'s CEO, Arthur Levinson (right), have in common? It's not their decision-making approaches. Semel is described as "methodical and rigorous in his decision making," while Levinson is more inclined to "trust his science 'gut' when deciding where to place his bets." What these CEOs have in common is that they made *Business Week* magazine's most recent list of the Best Managers of the Year.[1]

One of the keys to being an effective manager is understanding that each decision-making style has its advantages and disadvantages--there is no single best approach to decision making for every situation. Intuitive decision making works well in some situations (e.g., complex or ambiguous situations), and a detail-oriented approach works well for others (e.g., highly structured situations). Having a proclivity for one approach or the other doesn't really determine whether a manager will be successful. A manager simply needs to understand the advantages of her/his style and appreciate the value of working with people who have a different approach.

Appreciating Personality Diversity

Personality is defined as enduring patterns in a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviors across situations. Personality traits are behavioral predispositions. Many things other than our personalities affect how we react to various situations and interact with other people, so our personality traits are not hard-and-fast rules for predicting our behaviors, but they are behavioral tendencies. Personality dimensions are the areas in which our personalities differ. For instance, a bullfighter or an entrepreneur might be very low on the "risk aversion" dimension. That is, they are willing to pursue fairly risky courses of action. In contrast, loan officers should probably be higher in risk aversion. I want the loan officers at my credit union to carefully scrutinize the loan applications they receive, and to avoid making risky loans.

Appreciating the diverse personalities of the people we interact with helps us to understand why they act the way they do and how to get the most out of them. For instance, there are advantages to lower risk aversion

(e.g., willingness to be innovative and adventurous) and higher risk aversion (e.g., fewer errors). Appreciating personality diversity means respecting the strengths and limitations of each individual, and knowing how to capitalize on each individual's strengths. There is no "one best way" when it comes to risk aversion. Some decisions are best approached from a risk-averse perspective, and others from the opposite perspective. With regard to this risk aversion example, appreciating personality diversity means following risk-averse people when risks must be minimized, and following the risk-takers when it's time to be bold.

Appreciating personality diversity is the opposite of dogmatically expecting everyone to view situations the way you do--no matter how successful you have been using your approach. We don't all think alike, but that's often a good thing.

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Practicing This Management Skill

In many ways, increasing awareness of personality diversity is a lot like developing self-awareness. One of the most effective ways to understand the personalities of the people you work with is to ask them to fill out a personality inventory and discuss their results with the group. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a popular personality inventory. The questionnaire has 100 questions, and it describes personalities on four dimensions. (Although we often use the term "personality test," measures like the MBTI do not suggest that any personality type is better than others. There are no good or bad scores; just descriptions of the thought, feeling and behavior patterns of people with various personality traits.) Keirsey has similar personality inventories on-line at www.keirsey.com. *LeaderLetter* subscribers have recommended the inventories at QueenDom.com to me, but I have not had a chance to look them over myself. Once you and your co-workers have completed personality inventories, you can form groups to discuss your results and how your personalities relate to your work experiences. Naturally, this sort of activity is most productive when lead by a trained facilitator.

A few cautions are in order before you start shoving personality inventories at your staff. First, people can be suspicious of personality inventories. A couple of years ago someone wrote Anne Fisher, *Fortune* magazine advice columnist, and expressed concerns about being asked by a consultant to fill out a personality inventory at work. Management said that the personality inventory was going to be used in a training and development activity, but the writer wondered whether management was actually setting up grounds for dismissal. My initial reaction to reading that letter was, "How paranoid! No one would ever lose his or her job over an MBTI score." But, the concern isn't completely irrational (just 99%). After all, personality inventories are sometimes used for pre-employment screening of job applicants. For many people, the last personality inventory they filled out was part of a job application process. So, it's important to keep in mind that some people will worry about what will happen to them if they give the "wrong" answers. Anything that can be done to allay their fears is worth considering (e.g., confidentiality and self-scoring the inventories).

Second, some people consider their personality information too personal to share. Efforts to build appreciation for personality diversity must respect individuals' privacy. While most people are willing to share their personality inventory results, don't assume that everyone is. Encourage people to open up and share, but don't pressure them.

Finally, I am against automatically excluding a person from an opportunity because her/his personality isn't best suited for the challenge. Consider this dilemma: If you were a sales manager, would you hire an introvert to work on your sales team? It's a tough decision. All else equal, an introvert would be less likely to succeed in sales than an extrovert because sales jobs tend to require gregariousness and assertiveness (behavior traits typical of extroverts, not introverts). However, we know that there are some top salespeople who are introverted. Due to superior drive, intellect or something else, those individuals overcome the disadvantage of having a personality that's not ideal for the job. It can be difficult and stressful to overcome a lack of personality-job fit (and sometimes it makes sense to switch to a better fitting job), but overcoming that lack of fit with extra effort is possible.

Of course, you don't have to discuss personalities with others to increase your appreciation for personality diversity. Simply studying personality traits and thinking about how they apply to yourself and to the people you interact with can help you become somewhat more aware of personality diversity.

In Summary ...

People with different personalities have different inherent strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, the

best groups are made up of members with diverse personalities who learn to appreciate and put to use each other's strengths. Managers should promote an appreciation for personality diversity. Discussions of personality inventories, especially when facilitated by an expert, can be an effective way to foster such appreciation.

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Note
1. The Best Managers. *Business Week*; 1/13/2003 Issue 3815, pp 56-68.

Photo Credit
   Photo of Semel: AFP/YAHOO/File, e-mailed to me from Yahoo! News, news.yahoo.com.
   Photo of Levinson: http://www.genentech.com/gene/about/management/images/levinson.jpg, accessed April 29, 2004.

Sources
   Robbins, S. P. (2001). *Organizational behavior*, (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions
   LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, Raj Soin College of Business, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To subscribe, simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To unsubscribe, e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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E-mail Your Comments
   Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please e-mail them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **I learn a lot from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Good, Clean Joke

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To:  All staff, Los Alamos National Laboratory
From:  Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor
Re:  Necessary Security Changes

Due to an unfortunate overreaction by the 9/11 Commission to our minor security problems, we will
need to implement a few changes at Los Alamos National Laboratory to increase security.

Effective Monday:

1.  The brown paper bag in which we store the computer disk drives that contain the nation's nuclear
secrets will no longer be left on the picnic table at the staff commissary during lunch hour. It will
be stored in the vault.

2.  The three-letter security code for accessing the vault will no longer be "M-O-M." To confuse
spies, that security code will be reversed. Please do not tell anyone or write the code on the vault.

3.  Researchers bearing a security clearance of Level 5 and higher will no longer be permitted to
exchange updates on their work by posting advanced-physics formulas on the men's room walls.

4.  Staff members will no longer be allowed to take home small amounts of plutonium, iridium or
uranium for use in those "little weekend projects around the house." That includes those of you who
have used those materials to help your children with their science fair projects.
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5. We are indefinitely suspending our policy of permitting staff members to check out thermonuclear devices for "recreational use." We have not yet decided whether exceptions will be made for Halloween, the Fourth of July or New Year's Eve. We will keep you posted.

6. Employees may no longer "borrow" the AA batteries from the burglar alarm system to power their Game Boys and compact-disc players during working hours.

7. When reporting for work each day, all employees must enter through the front door. The janitor has been instructed to discontinue the practice of admitting employees who tap three times on the side door to avoid clocking in late.

These additional security measures are not intended to be punitive. The goal is simply to demonstrate to the public our commitment to protect the valuable national secrets that have been entrusted to our care. Remember, security isn't a part-time job; it's an imperative, all 37 1/2 hours of the week!

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