

Leading Diverse Teams

Introduction

Today more than ever, businesses are expanding globally and building partnerships with companies across multiple borders, industries, and platforms. Establishing diverse teams who work in the best interest of your company is critically important for achieving business success. In the wake of increased globalization, business leaders are left facing the challenge of building, developing, and managing diverse teams. This reading will help to clarify the practical steps that you can take in order to guarantee team cohesion and success.

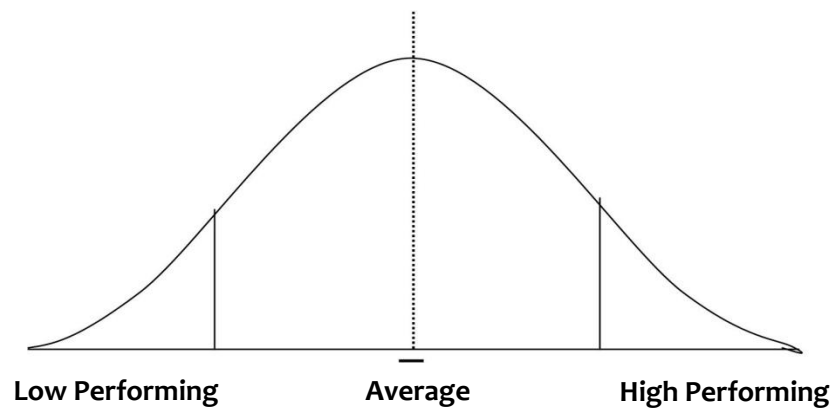
Differences between Diverse and Homogeneous Teams

In simple terms, diverse teams include people who possess a wide variety of experiences and unique opinions. On the other hand, homogeneous teams consist of people from similar backgrounds who share similar viewpoints. Managing a diverse team can lead to unique challenges, advantages, pitfalls, and successes. Homogeneous teams often lead to mediocrity.

Successfully coordinating the many viewpoints that arise in a diverse environment will often present the greatest challenge for team leaders. Different points of view, misunderstandings, and stereotypes can contribute to the ineffectiveness of a team. A workgroup that consists of members from a variety of cultural backgrounds can affect how the team communicates and interacts with one another. For example, a person from an Asian culture might seek out face-to-face business interactions, while an American may favor more impersonal approaches. If left unchecked, these minor cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings that pose a significant threat to group cohesion.

At its core, diversity fosters innovation and high-level creativity. If energy is directed toward a common goal, a diverse team's performance can expand well beyond that of a homogeneous team. For instance, a marketing team consisting of members from a variety of cultures, age ranges, and educational experiences is better suited to understanding the needs and wants of all sorts of customers from around the globe.

Team performance is often charted against a typical bell curve, with low performing teams on the far left hand side of the curve, average performing teams in the middle, and high performing teams on the far right hand side of the curve. Below is a graphical representation of a bell curve that notes team performance.



According to research, diverse teams tend to fall into either the low performing or high performing categories. In comparison, homogeneous teams frequently fall into the average performing category. What steps can leaders take to ensure that their diverse teams fall into the high performing category?

How to Lead Diverse Teams to High Performance

In a 2007 video presentation, Dr. Martha Maznevski discusses a three step process for cultivating workgroup diversity. Dr. Maznevski is a professor and MBA Program Director at IMD Business School in Switzerland. She is the author of numerous articles and books on the subject of organizational behavior, specializing in leadership, teams, and diversity. She has a wealth of practical experience consulting and advising businesses across the globe on diversity and management best practices. Dr. Maznevski states that there are three important skills—*mapping*, *bridging*, and *integrating*—that leaders must know and implement in order to build high performing teams.

- **Mapping** – Dr. Maznevski defines mapping as a means for identifying the differences and similarities among team members, typically these include personality, gender, culture, profession, work experience, skills, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. This step involves the team members listing each member's name on a piece of paper with their corresponding differences and similarities. This process helps members recognize and take advantage of everyone else's abilities.
- **Bridging** – According to Dr. Maznevski, the next step toward leading a high performing diverse team is bridging. Bridging includes communicating effectively through active listening, speaking, and understanding. Dr. Maznevski notes that bridging can be broken down into three additional steps: *approaching*, *decentering*, and *recentering*.
 1. *Approaching* – This step requires members of the team to be comfortable approaching other individuals with their questions and comments. This simple notion builds the foundation for a strong performing team.
 2. *Decentering* – This step requires actively listening to other members' perspectives and differing points of view. Empathizing with other peoples' opinions helps to reinforce cooperation.
 3. *Recentering* – The final step of bridging is recentering. This step requires team members to develop common team goals, norms, definitions, and objectives. Establishing shared goals creates a common environment for the team to excel.
- **Integrating** – The final step for building a high performing diverse team is integrating. Integrating consists of building team participation, resolving conflict, and creating innovation. Dr. Maznevski emphasizes the correlation between integrated teams and high performance in the workplace.

These three stages are sequential. If a team does not complete the mapping stage, then the team is never able to move on to the bridging stage. Likewise, if a team does not complete the bridging stage, then the team is never able to move on to the integrating stage. Teams that perform well spend time mapping their differences, bridging their diversities, and then letting performance take its course through the process of integration.

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Summary

- Reconciling different points of view, misunderstandings, and stereotypes is the primary challenge faced by leaders of diverse teams.
- A diverse team often produces innovative ideas and high-level creativity.
- Diverse teams will most likely fail if their members continue to hold on to preconceived notions and stereotypes.
- Diverse teams tend to perform in either the low performing or high performing categories, while homogeneous teams perform in the average performing category.
- Dr. Maznevski, an organizational leadership professor, author, and consultant, claims that mapping, bridging, and integrating are essential steps for cultivating team diversity.
- During mapping, the team identifies each member's differences and similarities.
- During bridging, team members communicate through active listening, speaking, and understanding with consideration for other member's differences. Bridging is broken down into three additional steps:
 1. approaching: to be motivated to approach other members and understand their differences;
 2. decentering: listening to other member's perspectives; and
 3. recentering: developing common team goals, norms, definitions, and objectives.
- During the integrating phase, team members work at building team participation, resolving conflict, and innovating.