

The Leader Within

Our public school teachers told us that no two snowflakes are exactly alike. Looking out of my window at a furious snowstorm causes me to wonder whether that is true. I have no way of testing that and scientists add their voices to confirm the veracity of our teachers. One thing I am convinced of is the uniqueness of every person. How do we deal with such diversity?

We tend to cope with the diversity of people by using generalizations. To the extreme, we use stereotypes (“Men never ask for directions.” “Canadians are crazy about hockey.” “Rich people have a good life.”). What line do we cross in going from generalizing to stereotyping?

Generalizations do help us to make sense of the world and to function more effectively. For example, when you pick a product from a shelf, your previous experience or the recommendation of a trusted source takes the anxiety out of its purchase and subsequent use. Generalizations are part history and part expectations.

In the workplace, especially where there is a sizeable staff employed in different tasks, generalizations (including history and expectations) allow leaders to lead, managers to manage and workers to work without rethinking everything about the job each new day. We share commonalities, mutual understandings, standard skills and performance expectations.

But what about the uniqueness of persons? Is that left outside the door of the office or factory or store? Might we say both “Yes” and “No”? People performing a job are (in most cases but not all) expected to conform and perform to standards. Yet, it should be obvious that performance is not the totality of a person.

As a worker, there are certain things that are best “checked at the door” because they would cause distraction, risk safety (for others as well as myself), deprive my employer of my good labour and other detriments. As a manager, I want my team to be focused on the task at hand (for the same reasons as above) but I also want to remind myself that there is a lot going on in each life. There is a great variety of backgrounds, skills, abilities, interests, temperaments, learning styles and much more.

What initiatives have you seen that show respect for the uniqueness of persons and the great diversity among employees?

I will revisit this theme in a future edition under the topic of “worldview.” For now, why not pause and appreciate the diversity in your workplace or marketplace?

Bret Maukonen

The Coach Within

Perception is key to how we approach diversity. “Different” is a neutral word to some people, potentially threatening to others and somewhat energizing to still others. Where are you on that continuum?

Although diversity is a concept that has garnered considerable attention in the corporate sphere as well as in recent legislation, it is also significant on a personal level, especially in interactions. Bret’s work with PeopleMap™ and mine with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) have given us useful insights into the benefits of diversity in temperament and personality preferences.

Concerning relationships, they say “opposites attract.” What are the implications of meeting with diversity? Well, it can definitely stimulate creativity and conversation. We all have, probably, contemplated the boredom of facing too much “sameness.” However, when people don’t “attract”—when “opposites” produce conflict and stress—it is often because of the wish that other people were more like us! In fact, diversity is one of the seven basic elements that characterize most interpersonal conflicts, according to Dudley Weeks (*Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution*).

We can perceive a particular difference as beneficial or as a hindrance to a relationship, a project or whatever. How we perceive it can affect how we handle it. According to Weeks, “*Diversity is a healthy aspect of human society. Diversity can open up possibilities, challenge us to consider alternatives, and keep us from allowing ourselves to stagnate. We need to celebrate diversity, not fear it or perceive it as a threat.*”

In both individual and team contexts, we coach clients to enjoy their own uniqueness and celebrate the diversity in their world. Usually this process involves fostering intentionality regarding what one believes and values, and how differences are perceived and acted upon.

I think it bears repeating—perception is key to how we approach diversity. Since perception is a choice, we have the opportunity to perceive something as “different” in a positive rather than in a negative sense. Do you agree with Weeks that diversity can open up possibilities? If we don’t consider diversity, what difference does it make? :-)

Lynne Maukonen

To Ponder . . . We share much in common but, as a person, what are those things that make you “uniquely you”? What is something that is unique about yourself that you would like to develop for your greater enjoyment of life? In the midst of diversity, what uniqueness do you see in other individuals and how can you encourage that “specialness?”