



# Diversity = Strength: The Power of Multiple Points of View



by Maren Fox

July 12, 2018

Does an ad in which a black woman transforms into a white woman after using body wash sound like a good idea to you? How about a black boy wearing a sweatshirt reading “cutest monkey in the jungle” in an ad? These are real examples of ads that companies—Dove and H&M, respectively—released which have been called cringeworthy, racially insensitive, and outright racist. When these situations arise, many wonder aloud, “Did those companies not have ANY black people on staff?” The answer for many organizations, unfortunately, is that **diversity continues to lag**, thereby creating organizational blind spots that contribute to these types of harmful blunders.

By inviting people with different cultural experiences and perspectives to the table, organizations can **eliminate these blind spots**. How? By enhancing understanding of how messaging, products, and services are received by people with different points of view. And that’s just one way diversity builds strength. Diversity fosters innovation and problem-solving by pushing everyone to look at things from different perspectives. Diversity also ensures that organizations are attracting and retaining top talent. Moreover, with organizations that rank higher in diversity being **21 percent more likely** to rank above average in profits, it’s clear that diversity equals strength.

Today, many organizations that lack diversity face a common problem: There's not enough dissent. When homogenous leadership teams engage in "groupthink" they fail to consider outside perspectives and therefore create the blind spots that later get them in trouble. The key is to not only bring people together with multiple points of view—but to embrace differences. Traditionally, however, organizations have had "managed diversity." Martin Davidson, a leading educator, researcher, and consultant on organizational diversity, explains that managed diversity emphasizes helping "people with different perspectives and identities work well together *despite*" their differences. However, Davidson argues, organizations need to focus on making people work well together *because of* their differences. In his book, ***The End of Diversity As We Know It***, Davidson calls this new approach "leveraging diversity."

"This goal of attracting and engaging employees with varied identities and perspectives is a necessary part of any significant diversity initiative," Davidson writes. "But it isn't sufficient in itself to take full advantage of what those differences can offer. Organizations that truly leverage difference cultivate the capability to engage with and learn from diverse stakeholders, including employees, customers, partners, and communities. They use what they learn to explore how they can do the work of their organization more effectively. They are able to apply lessons of difference to domains as wide-ranging as customer engagement, operational procedures, and alliances with community resources."

By embracing multiple points of view, organizations gain a more holistic—and realistic—understanding of the marketplace, customers, and employees. Sure, this 360-degree view can better inform strategic decisions, but it can also help organizations avoid costly, embarrassing, and harmful blunders that make organizations appear tone-deaf, insensitive, or prejudiced. Davidson writes that organizations can become "difference factories" when leaders focus on "seeing, understanding, and engaging difference." As Dove and H&M demonstrate, more companies need to begin to leverage differences and address the blind spots created by homogenous leadership teams and organizations.

## Fuel Innovation: Bring Multiple Points of View to the Table

The benefits of diversity go beyond understanding multiple points of view. Those differing perspectives can compel people to push through their own biases and look at challenges

helps generate ideas that are more flexible and adaptable to changing market and customer demands.

Experts on fostering organizational inclusion of diverse perspectives, Howard J. Ross and JonRobert Tartaglione write in ***Our Search for Belonging*** that our sense of belonging to in-groups or out-groups can be broken down into two categories: bonding and bridging. Bonding occurs among homogeneous groups that share cultural norms and values, where people share a deeper level of understanding of each other because of their similarities. Bridging occurs among diverse groups of people, and it forces us to think outside of our own worldview. And that can spark new ideas. “Bridging facilitates the sharing and interchange of ideas, information, and innovation and can be an important factor in building agreement and consensus among groups representing diverse interests,” Ross and Tartaglione write.

“Bridging can broaden and extend social capital by increasing what has been called the ‘radius of trust’ that people experience,” Ross and Tartaglione write. Building a radius of trust is important, too. After all, trust and closeness have been found to be key ingredients of innovation and problem-solving, **research shows**. Teams reporting high levels of “closeness” were 22 percent better at solving difficult problems, and they enjoyed tackling challenges 10 percent more than teams that weren’t as close. The takeaway? Diversity directly contributes to innovation by encouraging team members to broaden their perspectives, and bridging across diverse experiences can build trust, which is a key contributor to innovation and problem-solving. Ross and Tartaglione write that “bridging occurs when we are aware that our point of view is just that—a point of view. And we are willing to listen to and accept another point of view.”

## Leverage Diversity and Inclusion to Draw Top Talent

It’s time for organizational leaders to look past their biases to find top talent in a broader pool of applicants. Many industries face a unique challenge: finding qualified employees. In the tech sector, for example, 2 million positions **are expected** to go unfilled in the cybersecurity domain alone by the end of 2019. The problem? Lack of diversity and inclusion. Computer science jobs have increased more than 330 percent since 1990, the PEW Research Center **has found**. Yet, just 25 percent of those new roles have been filled by women. Meanwhile, black

There's a catch, however. Simply hiring a diversity of employees is a great start, but you must also **deliberately work toward inclusion** in order for them to excel. Bridging is one way to build trust and closeness between individual employees, but proactively addressing gaps in the workplace experience at the organizational level is another important factor. Michael C. Bush, CEO of Great Place to Work, the organization behind the *Fortune* magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work, says that inclusion begins with addressing gaps in the workplace experiences of employees from different backgrounds. When employees experience gaps in fairness and levels of responsibility, there's a cascading effect of negative consequences. "Employees are less likely to be fully engaged or productive if they perceive an unequal playing field, one where they are less welcome to play an important role," Bush writes in his book, *A Great Place to Work for All*. He concludes, "Organizations get the full benefits of a diverse workforce not just by creating a more diverse workforce, but by creating a great workplace experience for people of all colors."

Conversely, effective diversity and inclusion have been found to **bolster individual productivity** and overall organizational performance, and diversity and inclusion have become increasingly important factors in workplace satisfaction and engagement for all employees—not just those from historically under-represented groups. That means boosting diversity and inclusion efforts can help attract and retain *all* employees, not just those from under-represented groups.

## The Final Word: Building Strength Through Diversity

Bringing diversity to your company does much more than help avoid cringeworthy and racially offensive ads and public messaging. Welcoming multiple points of view can help your organization better understand customers, employees, and changing markets. Sure, that can help avoid embarrassing and costly blunders—but it can also drive innovation and creative problem-solving by pushing people to look at old challenges from a new perspective. Finally, diversity broadens talent pools and has been shown to make *all* employees more engaged and productive. Building strength through diversity and inclusion isn't only the right thing to do, it's also a savvy business decision.

Topics: **Your Organization, overcoming bias, implicit bias, unconscious bias, retention, Inclusion, Organizational Change and Development**