

Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

The Power of Personality Diversity

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You're a fly on the wall observing a typical end-of-quarter leadership meeting at company X. George, director of sales, is visibly frustrated with Eric, director of finances. A powerful man with a hearty laugh, George is charismatic, energetic, and challenging. He loudly argues that Eric's team is not flexible enough to take the organization to the next level. Eric hardly has the time to think of a suitable response before being interrupted by Laurie, head of customer service. Laurie angrily sides with Eric and accuses the sales department of disorganization, inefficiency, and lack of concern for policy. In the meantime, Emily, the marketing director, has fabulous ideas that would most likely help George, Eric, and Laurie understand one another better. She doesn't express them, though, because she's too uncomfortable with all the conflict around her. While all this is happening the president smiles broadly and calmly says: "Well, this was a productive conversation: George and Eric, how about you two solve this problem on your own? Meeting adjourned."

Perhaps you've participated in meetings like this one in the past. It is likely that you encounter personality differences everyday. Interestingly, even though personality differences may explain much of the conflict that we witness in the workplace, they may be mistaken for more visible and commonly seen differences. For instance, one could decide that George and Eric have problems because George is Hispanic and Eric is African-American. We could also conclude that Laurie's concerns have more to do with her gender experiences in the workplace than with George's respect for policy.

We shouldn't, however, ignore personality simply because we can't see it or touch it. Personality colors the lenses through which we see, judge, and relate to others. It gives us a special language – a language that only those who share key pieces of our personality puzzle can understand. Moreover, it is a relevant source of bias. For instance, interviewers might prefer applicants who act and speak like *them*, answering questions the way *they would have answered*. Likewise, managers could evaluate more highly employees whose personality traits are similar to their own.

Interestingly, personality may be as inborn as the shape of our eyes and the color of our skin. Studies conducted with identical twins led researchers to conclude that personality traits are 40 to 60% genetic (Livesley, Jang, and Vernon, 2003). Our personality is remarkably stable and is likely to be connected to our learning style, the way we lead others and most of our behaviors in the workplace. In other words, when we blame a colleague for being "too introverted" or ask a leader to become "more imaginative" we could be expecting the impossible. We all have a certain personality infrastructure to work with, and while some stretching is possible, too much of it could cause a great deal of stress. We can only stretch so far before we break apart.

Recently, there has been a flurry of research activity analyzing personality through the angle of the Five Factor Model (FFM), arguably the most important personality model to date. A quick database search on one single scholarly journal – the Journal of Personality and Individual Differences – revealed 110 research reports and articles between 1996 and 2005. These studies connect five major personality factors to behaviors in areas such as leadership, love, sexual activity, study habits, religious choices, and emotional intelligence. Schneider and Smith (2004) argued that “these days, if one mentions personality, it is assumed he or she is referring to the five-factor model” (p. 388).

The FFM allows researchers to study personality through the following broad five factors (Howard & Howard, 2001):

- Need for stability or negative emotionality – our level of resilience when experiencing and/or reacting to stress
- Extraversion – our tolerance for sensory bombardment, the level of social interaction that we crave
- Originality or openness to experience – our focus on innovation versus efficiency, our interest in the “new and untested” versus the “tried and true.”
- Accommodation or agreeableness – the way that we react to conflicts or disagreements, our tendency to “stand our ground,” “seek middle ground,” or submit to others’ wishes.
- Consolidation or conscientiousness – our level of spontaneity and flexibility versus our tendency towards discipline and a focus on predefined goals

It is likely that you have seen these traits in action in your workplace. For instance, in our example, Laurie exhibits a high “Need for Stability” behavior (emotional, fast to react in anger) and George is a classic example of high Extraversion (energetic, charismatic) and low Accommodation (challenging). As Laurie accuses George of being disorganized it is likely that they differ in Organization, a subtrait of the Consolidation factor. Laurie and George could also have contrasting Originality scores – George wishes to “take the company to the next level” (high Originality) while Laurie values efficiency (low Originality).

Because of the impact of personality on workplace relations, it is a central and visceral piece of diversity initiatives. Of course it is not *the only* piece. Other primary diversity components such as race, gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation are vital as well. These traits are historically connected to workplace and societal discrimination. They need to be addressed, and addressed effectively if your diversity initiative is to be taken seriously.

Personality diversity, however, is a great starting point, and a helpful companion to all diversity initiatives. It is present everywhere. It *always* matters. Personality education could, therefore, be a key between the success and the failure of your comprehensive diversity education processes.

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