

LEADERSHIP, CULTURE & ORGANIZATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Diversity of Perspective

Who is in the room matters. What people are willing and able to contribute may matter just as much.

By Leo M. Tonkin

When leaders hear the word *diversity*, the first association is often demographic diversity - differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, religion, background, and other dimensions that have shaped much of the corporate diversity conversation.

Those differences matter.

But there is another dimension of diversity that deserves just as much leadership attention: **the diversity of what people see, think, question, understand, experience, and are willing to say.**

Two people can look at the same customer problem, the same strategy, the same employee issue, or the same set of facts and see something entirely different.

A younger employee may question a practice everyone else has learned to accept. Someone who has been with the organization for twenty years may understand why an earlier attempt failed. A frontline associate may see consequences the executive team cannot see from the conference room. Someone from another function may recognize an assumption that has become invisible to everyone inside the function.

Diversity in the room is not the same as diversity in the conversation.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What if one of the most consequential forms of diversity in an organization is the diversity of what people are actually willing and able to say?

Different people do not automatically create different thinking.

Representation matters. Different backgrounds, experiences, generations, disciplines, and ways of seeing the world can expand what an organization is capable of understanding.

But representation alone does not guarantee contribution.

You can put twelve different people around a table and still end up with one point of view.

People learn very quickly how an organization actually operates. They learn whose ideas receive attention. They learn which questions are welcome and which ones create discomfort. They learn what the boss wants to hear. They learn how disagreement is received. They watch what happens to the person who raises the problem no one else wants to discuss.

Eventually, people adjust. They may continue attending the meetings. They may continue nodding. They may even continue being asked for their opinions. But they stop contributing what they really think.

REPRESENTATION

Who is present? What backgrounds, experiences, generations, disciplines, and perspectives are represented?

CONTRIBUTION

What are people actually able to bring into the conversation - and can it influence what happens next?

Representation asks who is present. Contribution asks what they are actually able to bring into the conversation.

Inviting input is not the same as being open to influence.

Leaders frequently ask for feedback: "What do you think?" "Any concerns?" "Does anyone see this differently?" Those can be useful questions. But people pay far more attention to what happens **after** someone answers.

Does the leader become defensive? Does the person have to prove that the concern is legitimate? Is disagreement treated as resistance? Or does the leader become curious?

THE DISTINCTION

A leader can invite feedback while having no intention of allowing that feedback to affect his or her thinking. That is not authentic listening. It is collecting responses.

Listening begins with the possibility that I may not have the complete picture.

There are many useful listening techniques: maintain eye contact, ask questions, paraphrase, do not interrupt, demonstrate empathy. But a person can perform every one of those behaviors while internally waiting for the other person to stop talking so they can explain why the other person is wrong.

Authentic listening requires something more difficult: being genuinely open to the possibility that I may learn something that changes my thinking.

DOING LISTENING

Performing the behaviors associated with listening.

BEING A LISTENER

Entering the conversation genuinely open to discovering something you do not already know.

The test of listening is not whether I heard you. It is whether I was genuinely willing to discover something I did not already know.

Our filters come into the room with us.

None of us encounters a situation completely objectively. We interpret what we see and hear through our experiences, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, successes, failures, roles, and prior conclusions.

That is true of the newest employee in the organization. It is also true of the CEO.

The danger is not that we have filters. We all do. The danger is believing that we do not.

A leader may believe he or she is listening while unconsciously translating everything being said into an existing view of the situation.

THE QUESTION

If I only listen to you through what I already believe, am I really listening to you - or mostly listening to myself?

Understanding is not agreement.

Respecting another person's perspective does not require adopting it. Alignment does not require identical thinking. A mature leadership culture should be capable of holding disagreement without automatically turning it into disrespect, disloyalty, resistance, or conflict.

What might this person be seeing that I cannot see from where I sit?

An open door is not the same as a safe door.

Many leaders pride themselves on having an open-door policy. But an open door does not necessarily mean people believe it is safe to walk through it and tell the truth.

Employees watch. They notice how bad news is received. They notice whether leaders reward candor or punish discomfort. They notice whether disagreement affects relationships, opportunities, assignments, or how someone is perceived afterward.

And they adapt accordingly.

The absence of disagreement is not necessarily evidence of alignment. Sometimes it is evidence that people have stopped telling you what they really think.

That silence can become expensive. Problems remain hidden longer. Assumptions go unchallenged. Weak ideas survive because no one wants to challenge the person who proposed them. Innovation narrows. Decisions are made with incomplete information. Leaders gradually become more disconnected from the reality other people are experiencing.

SILENCE

People withhold what they see because speaking carries too much perceived cost.

ALIGNMENT

People understand the direction, have had room to contribute, and choose to move together.

This happens at every level.

It would be easy to make this an issue only for CEOs and executive teams. It is not. Every manager creates a local culture. Every supervisor teaches people what happens when someone disagrees. Every team leader communicates whether questions are welcome, whether bad news is safe to bring forward, and whether another perspective is viewed as useful or inconvenient.

CLOSEST TO THE CUSTOMER

May know something the executive team cannot see.

CLOSEST TO THE WORK

May understand why a new idea will fail in practice.

NEW OR DIFFERENT VOICE

May notice what everyone else has stopped seeing.

Generational differences matter too. So do functional differences. Finance, operations, sales, HR, technology, and the customer may all be looking at the same decision through very different realities. The question is whether the organization has built the capacity to hear them.

How much of what your people know is actually available to the organization?

Ultimately, this is bigger than diversity terminology. It is about how much of the intelligence already present in an organization is actually available to leadership.

- 1 REPRESENTATION**
Who is here?
- 2 EXPRESSION**
What are people willing to say?
- 3 UNDERSTANDING**
Are we genuinely listening to understand what they see?
- 4 INFLUENCE**
Can a different perspective affect our thinking?
- 5 ACTION**
Does anything change because of what we learned?

THE ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITY

Diversity becomes more than composition when different perspectives can be expressed, understood, considered, and translated into better decisions and action.

The purpose is not endless debate. Leaders still have to decide. Teams still have to align. Organizations still have to execute. But better decisions become possible when the organization has access to more of what its people actually know.

The leadership test.

When someone disagrees with me, what happens next?

When someone delivers bad news, what does my reaction teach the room?

Whose voices are regularly heard - and whose are not?

Are people closest to the work contributing before decisions are made?

Do we confuse disagreement with lack of commitment?

Do I ask for feedback because I want confirmation - or because I am willing to learn?

When was the last time another person's perspective actually changed your mind?

The real test of diversity may not be simply who is in the room. It may be whether different perspectives can enter the conversation, be genuinely considered, influence the thinking - and change what happens next.