Lessons in Leading Diverse Teams

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As a symbol of the breadth and variety of leadership as a concept, the latest Ambrosetti Leadership Summit is a great example. The panel in Milan alongside me and my LBS Leadership Institute colleague, Vyla Rollins, included a mountaineer, a military chief, an airline executive and a bank CHRO.

We were there to present our many views on leadership. I found the military experience behind US Brigadier General Timothy Trainor's presentation of note. He's now the Dean of the Academic Board at West Point, and has previously collaborated with the UK-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq. He emphasised a tenet that I absolutely agree with: the principles of great leadership are timeless in that you need a set of values, to live them and to be true to them.

How you do that is situational. I very much enjoyed his comment that those of us engaged in training leaders have to believe that leaders aren't born but made.

My own contribution to this multi-dimensional summit was to focus on leading diverse teams, drawing on my research in this area. Here are a few of my key points.

Your team is diverse – get over it

Even if you don't think you are dealing with diversity, you are. When we used to think of diversity, we thought of race and gender, but there is so much more to consider: generational, age, sexual orientation, personality and even functional diversity.

Each form of diversity has its unique challenges, but each also shares the common theme of making it difficult to fully understand each other.

Diversity's rewards come with risk

With diversity comes greater potential for success, but also greater risk. When I ask people what they think the relationship between diversity and performance is in most groups and organisations, I get advocates of diversity passionate in believing it brings rewards, but also critics who call themselves 'realists' and do not see much advantage. In fact, both are correct.

The data shows that the more diverse the team is, the more diverse the outcome. In other words, the best performing and worst performing teams are also the most diverse. If you want reliable safe homogeneity the way to go is little diversity. However, if you want to be world class, you need to be diverse, but be aware that it has to be well-managed to extract that value.

Focus on how you work together as much as you focus on the who and what

Focus on coordination as much as cooperation. In the past, people have assumed we don't want to work with people who are different. Most surveys suggest in fact that people are positive and optimistic about working in diverse teams. Then when they actually have to work together they find it hard. We find misunderstandings develop.

This is the coordination problem. People understand different things in the same word: for example, trust means different things to different people and having a 'digital strategy' for your business means different things to different people. The more diverse the group, the more you have these misunderstandings, the more conflict tends to emerge.

Watch out for conflict…

Task conflict is when group members disagree about the content and outcomes of their tasks.

Process conflict is when the team disagrees about the 'how' a task is accomplished.

Relationship conflict happens when group members disagree about personalities, norms and values. You really don't want to get to this one: if you have people in the room hating each other, there is no way that is going to end well.

… and deal with it!

For task conflict, look to perspective take, listen and learn. For process conflict, start with discussing how decisions will be taken before discussing the content of the decision. And for the real nasty, relationship conflict, you're aiming to nurture an understanding and appreciation of differences rather than trying to create liking.

What's your outlook?

Your approach to managing diversity is critical. If you see diversity as a problem to be managed, you will not gain the potential benefits. If you genuinely believe in the power of people then you will achieve the potential rewards.

For me, the key to managing diversity in the team is to believe in the people in the room. Appreciate that the answer to any problem is already in the group, even if you don't have it personally. Somebody has the answer who may not yet know that they have the answer – leading diverse teams means enabling that answer to surface.

In short

I return to my four key principles for leading high performance teams:

1. Embrace the potential in diversity

2. Emphasise the need for coordination

3. Actively manage conflict

4. Team leaders need to be self-aware and open to feedback

Though at this summit I focused on the first three, when I'm pushed I will admit that if I had to select only one, it would be the fourth principle. How do your peers and the people you lead feel? I'd suggest that whether you are a military commander, a mountaineer or a corporate executive, being self-aware and open to feedback is the key.