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How To Recruit A Diverse Team



Building a diverse team that represents all stakeholders

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The challenges of building a team with a diversity of views is a classic problem shared by leaders around the world and across sectors. Whether you are an entrepreneur in Africa, the Chair of a listed company in Europe, or running a charity in North America, you need to build a team around you

that represents all of the stakeholders you manage and can advise you accordingly.

As a Professor of Organizational Behaviour who has helped leaders in all of these situations to build and manage effective teams, I have seen and studied the process of building a diverse team in a variety of situations. While the specific issues in each team are as unique as the situations leaders find themselves in, the core challenges are similar: how to persuade the very best talent from diverse backgrounds to engage with you; how to help all team members feel psychologically safe when their views conflict with each other; and how to reconcile conflicting views and come to unified decisions about the way forward.

The most important part of the challenge, of course, is the leader. To succeed, organizations need leaders who are good listeners and can facilitate a conversation questioning their own culture and ways of working. Beyond the leader, here are the insights I have gained from 30+ years of teaching and researching on how to build a team that is both effective, and diverse in their views.

A. Use a skills assessment

When filling vacancies, it is critical to not automatically slip into a 'like-for-like' replacement conversation. Teams evolve and so do their challenges. Each forthcoming vacancy is an opportunity to redefine the selection criteria to ensure a diverse and relevant set of views within the team. The first step is to review the future challenges and aspirations, and then look at current skills and perspectives on the team to identify what is needed but missing. If known, a list of members who will be leaving over the next few years will help you plan in greater depth.

A good skills audit includes considering those experiences and backgrounds that reflect stakeholder groups such as customers, suppliers, and employees to generate a description of the ideal team addition. When the time comes, creating the role specification should not simply be delegated to human resources. The conversation should start as a collective discussion across the whole team about what is needed. This then informs the development of the appropriate requirements. Selection needs to be disciplined, thoughtful, and flexible about the ‘must haves’ in terms of experience and skills in order to ‘hunt in a wider talent pool’.

B. Develop the pipeline of diverse talent

Developing a diverse team is not just about top-down monitoring. It should be bottom-up as well to ensure that diversity is a priority across the team and/or organization. This means everyone should be building relationships externally with candidates wherever you find them. Everyone should ask themselves who you might appoint in the future. The best teams coordinate their efforts to build a diverse network of candidates, with some team members investing time in attending professional events, others in next-generation workshops, and others attending talks where potential candidates are likely to participate.

C. Set clear targets and discuss regularly

In order to make diversity a reality, it needs to be owned by the entire group, not just the leader or a diversity officer. Target-setting is a necessary means to an important objective of achieving diversity, but it is a long-term process that can change over time. Targets should set a minimum standard. For example, if there is a public target of 33% women, you may also have an internal target of 50%. Many boards, for example, have private targets because they do not want to set public targets that they are not completely confident they will meet. The reason they do it, however, is that more

ambitious internal targets tend to result in teams who get closer to the internal target, exceeding external targets.

Where targets are not met, there needs to be some honest self-reflection across the team to identify why. What is it in the process, the culture, or the team itself that led to failure to nurture a diverse team? Ultimately, progress, or lack thereof, impacts the organization's reputation, and the team represents the role models of that organization. Ask yourself why a more diverse group of candidates did not emerge.

D. Choose the right help

It is not uncommon for searches to specify not only skills, but a particular demographic as well (e.g. all-female searches). It is important to have these conversations with the whole group to agree and align around each search before it happens because diversity means many different things to many different people, and you will want to agree explicitly within a search. A successful search needs to start with team unity and determination to do the 'right thing for the right reason'.

The use of search firms is commonplace in some senior recruiting. Outside help can facilitate a broad search, but is no guarantee. If you do use outside help, do not accept the answer 'we've looked and haven't found any suitable candidates'. If outside help is not yielding results, do not hesitate to get different help.

E. Use a diverse group to recruit a diverse group

To reduce bias, stereotyping, and groupthink, active consideration also needs to be given to who is leading the search. The easy option is to appoint members who have experience of working in human resources. However, creating a diverse committee – using multiple lenses to inform the composition – can provide opportunities for a new and unique

conversation on recruitment and composition. Recruitment committees need to be proactive in soliciting advice from a diverse range of individuals who can help identify blind spots or bias in the process.

The more diverse the committee, the more likely the process will be robust. As one senior leader told me, ‘if you have to choose who’s “good” out of three candidates, you pick the one who looks a bit like you, because you think you’re good’. A diverse selection process helps to ensure diverse appointments.

F. Invest significant time and energy in making diverse appointments

Recruiting diverse candidates often involves looking at non-traditional backgrounds to see skillsets and potential rather than whether a candidate ticks a traditional experience box. For example, track records that include being an entrepreneur are traditionally seen as desirable to advise a start-up, but can easily become a bar to entry as it creates the classic chicken and egg situation. How can potential individuals gain the requisite experience when it is already a key requirement to getting a role? This is especially challenging when seeking generational (or age) diversity. The issue here seems to be that every group wants another group to make the investment of developing target candidates so they can later appoint them.

Ultimately, if you want to create a diverse team that represents all of the stakeholders you manage, you will need to have an informed, targeted approach. Using these six principles will help you build the kind of team that is invaluable to you.

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