Project Diversity: Disaster or Dynamic
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"It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horse races."
—*Mark Twain*

In project teams, the word "diversity" can conjure up many feelings. We can consider it a blessing or a recipe for disaster based on our personal definition of it: the fact or quality of being different, an endless difference of opinions, a dialogue that creates balance, etc. But diversity in project teams can also be the seed for a dynamic group that encourages innovation and collaboration.

Our attitude toward diversity can change how a team operates. The models in this paper illustrate how diversity in project teams can effect greater and more creative long-term results by causing one to see things differently versus just doing something differently.

In this white paper, we will look at three issues concerning project diversity:

1. Diversity is everywhere. Diversity includes race, religion, culture, language, gender, sexual orientation, age, geographic location, occupation and education.

2. Attitude is everything. Our attitude influences our behavior. Often our attitudes about diversity are not obvious even to us, yet they drive our behavior.

3. Responsibility belongs to everyone. Project managers, project teams, stakeholders, vendors – no one is exempt from the issues of diversity.

Diversity is everywhere.
In every project team there is diversity, even in the team that is made up of members all from the home office in Cleveland, Ohio, who grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and still live in Cleveland, Ohio. There will probably be some men and some women on the team – that is diversity. There will probably be some people from HR, from IT, from Marketing, from Sales, from Engineering – that is diversity. There will probably be in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s – that is diversity. Unless our project team is made up of me, myself and I, there will be diversity on our project team. Consider this example from Jeannette Cabanis, in a 1997 *PMI Network* article entitled **Diversity: This Means You.**
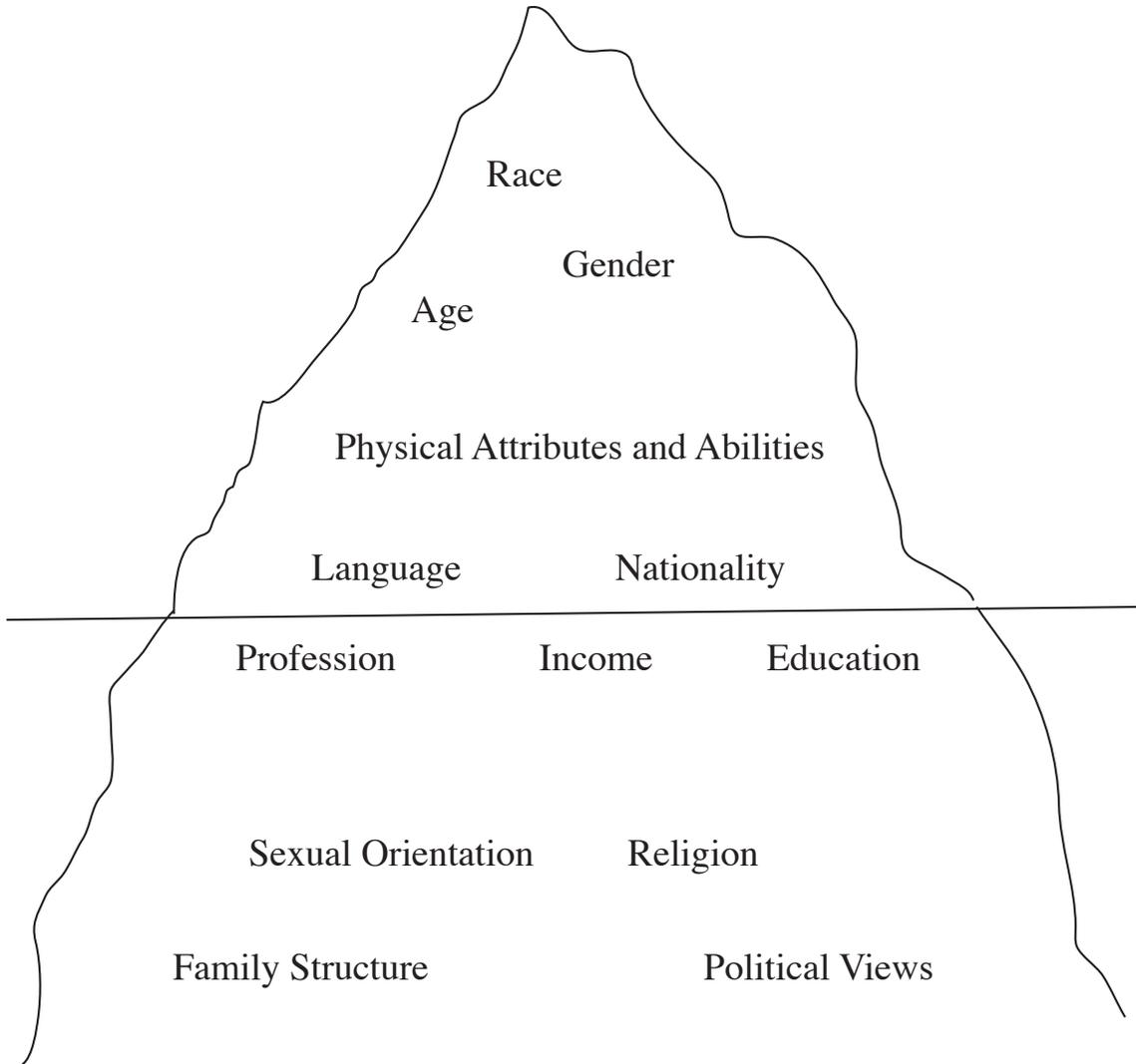
"Two women, both software developers, both in their late 30s, both the same race, whatever it may be, let's say they even share a religion. Homogeneous pair? Look closer. Let's call her Donna. She's married but she doesn't have any kids. Her husband is a high-tech salesman, makes the big bucks. They take exotic vacations; she collects art. Her parents, too, are well off; she went to a ritzy Eastern girls' school. She subscribes to *Gourmet* magazine but secretly prefers fast-food burgers. Her husband is her best friend;

she's not much for girl talk. Her primary worry this year: financial planning. They really want to buy a second home in the islands. Donna is right handed; she's a night owl who loves to work until the wee hours and sleep through the morning when she can; she does her best work between two and five a.m. In groups, she is very goal-oriented, likes to get more expense, and more worry. Leslie likes to cook: her social life is the church softball team eating pasta at her house. She talks to her childhood girlfriend Sally on the phone almost every week. An early riser, Leslie doodles thoughtfully with her left hand while she listens—it seems to sharpen her concentration (even though it drives Donna nuts). She likes being a team player at work; in groups she finds herself easily providing the "social glue" that helps people to communicate and bond. Her biggest worry this year: downsizing. Who will take care of her son and her mother if she loses her job?"

The Diversity Iceberg in Exhibit 1 illustrates the extent of diversity in every aspect of life, including project teams. Some forms of diversity are visible – race, gender, age, physical attributes such as height, weight and physical handicaps. Other forms of diversity are apparent after we start talking to someone – cultural, language and regional diversity. Still other forms may only become apparent after we get to know someone – religion, political inclinations and sexual orientation. No matter how much we embrace or dislike diversity, it is a fact of all projects.

The Diversity Iceberg

Visible Diversity

Race

Gender

Age

Physical Attributes and Abilities

Language   Nationality

Profession   Income   Education

Sexual Orientation   Religion

Family Structure   Political Views

Invisible Diversity

Exhibit 1: The Diversity Iceberg

Attitude is everything.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."
—*Antoine de Saint Exupery*

Our attitudes and beliefs drive our behaviors, and our behaviors in turn give us results. For example, some Project Managers could have the belief that people over 50 do not embrace technology; therefore deciding that anything having to do with innovative technology on a project will be the responsibility of younger IT team members. This may or may not cause problems on the project, as maybe the older IT team members are fine with this arrangement; maybe they don't notice, or maybe they are resentful. We often make assumptions on projects, which can cause trouble if not clarified. Remember, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are in their 50s.

The See-Do-Get Model in Exhibit 2 illustrates how our attitudes drive behaviors, which determine results. As an example of how the model works, let's take a cue from history. Imagine that we are all physicians in the 15th century. What was the belief system around illness in the 15th century? Where did it reside in the body? If you were sick, you were thought to have bad blood – a condition that meant that you were probably evil to some degree. If that's our paradigm, the way we "see" things, what do we "do" to heal patients? Bleed them. What kinds of results do we probably get? Dead people.

As physicians, we've taken the Hippocratic Oath and want to help people. It is obvious we're not getting very good results. We determine that we have to "do" something different. If our paradigm doesn't change, the believe continues to be that illness comes from bad blood, then taking small quantities of blood isn't working, what should we do? Take more blood out! Get them more involved in their healing process by letting them put their own leaches on. What are the results? Yes, even more dead people.

Let's imagine one of us, we'll call him Louis Pasteur, comes up with a very heretical idea that it's possible illness doesn't necessarily reside in the blood but actually comes from little tiny particles in the air that we can't even see that we're going to call "germs". If that becomes our new paradigm, what might we do differently? We could separate or quarantine patients so they don't spread disease. We could begin to sterilize instruments between patient visits. We could wash our hands. If we were to begin to do some of these things, we would eventually get different, and possibly better, results.

Does that mean the paradigm of illness residing in the blood is completely incorrect? Of course not. There is Leukemia and many viruses that are blood-borne diseases. Does it mean the belief is completely correct either? No – we need to be willing to be flexible and adapt our paradigms to a diverse set of facts.

Let's look at a work-related example about project management. There was a time when a commonly held belief, was that project management was solely the realm of IT and construction projects. They received the training and support to utilize the processes and got the benefits of doing projects in a more formal way. The rest of us were just doing "work" which we would do as best we could with our industry knowledge and basic organizational skills. The results were often not very good in relation to quality, budget and time. As people started to believe that project management could have widespread application, more organizations began providing appropriate project management training for each level. As people used project management techniques on daily work assignments, projects were more successful.

Diversity works on the same premise. We all have certain beliefs about others; some of our beliefs are conscious and many are not. Conscious or not, these beliefs drive our behaviors. The example in Exhibit 2 illustrates how beliefs about "new" employees could negatively or positively impact a project. For instance, a new employee is assigned to a project team. The Project Manager could have an a belief that "new people don't know about how we do work around here." That belief could drive certain behaviors such as, the P.M. does not ask for the new employees' opinion or may discredit comments, ideas and suggestions made by the new employees. The results of these behaviors might be that the new employee learns to keep quiet, believing that his/her thoughts are not valued.

If the Project Manager adopted a new belief, a new attitude or paradigm that says, "New people have the ability to see things in a new and different perspective." "New people can enlighten and improve our thinking." This new attitude would drive different behaviors such as encouraging new employees to contribute their ideas, proactively seeking out new employees for their diversity of thoughts. The results are more open, honest exchange of ideas and thoughts, which bring potential improvements and enhancements to our projects.
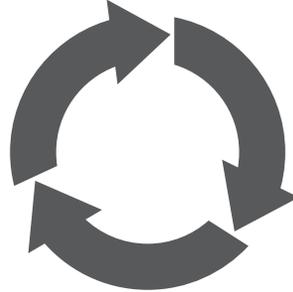
See - Do - Get
Model

SEE - beliefs, attitudes, paradigms

New people don't know about "how we work around here."

New people are unfamiliar with our corporate culture.

New people don't have much to offer a project team.

GET - results

The new people learn to keep quiet.

We develop group think on the project.

We get similar solutions and results as we have had in the past.

DO - behaviors, actions

We don't invite new employees to be on important project items.

We may put them on the team but we discount their comments and ideas.

SEE - beliefs, attitudes, paradigms

New people have the ability to see things with a new and different perspective.

New people can enlighten and improve our thinking.

GET - results

We tap into new ideas, options, and solutions.

We get more enthusiasm from new and old employees.

We achieve more success on our projects.

DO - behaviors, actions

We proactively seek new employees for our project teams.

We encourage their participation.

We value their opinions, even if we don't agree.

Exhibit 2: The See-Do-Get Model

Responsibility belongs to everyone.

"I have never learned anything from any man who agreed with me."
—Dudley Field Malone

We all encounter contrast throughout our lives. Many people's initial reaction is either flight or fight: the idea that if one can attack something enough or ignore it enough, it might eventually go away.

Imagine this as the bottom of a giant staircase of responses, as illustrated in Exhibit 3. The next level of response is tolerance: the ability to endure differences. Yet on another level is to accept there are differences. Many people are afraid that acceptance of differences is the same as agreeing with the differences

The next level up is to truly valuing differences. Beyond that, an even higher more effective, and productive level: is to *celebrate* our differences. When one gets to the level where the differences of each individual team member are celebrated, unlimited potential is created.

Summary

Diversity is more than just a way to expose one's team to different points of view, but also a proven, effective way to achieve more creative and better results. By understanding the concept of diversity, we learn that a paradigm change– like "seeing" things differently – will cause people to more naturally change their behaviors than if they were just told to "do" something. As Stephen Covey says, *"Each of us is born with the gift of self awareness. We can stand apart from our paradigms, we can examine them, and we can change them if necessary."* By selecting members of a project team who see things unique to their life experiences and can get them to value and celebrate those differences of background, opinion, views, etc., your team will be able to quickly create greater and more creative results. In the words of Alvin Toffler, an American writer, futurist and former editor of Fortune magazine, *"The illiterate of the 21 century will not be those who cannot read and write, it will be those who cannot learn, un-learn, and re-learn!"*
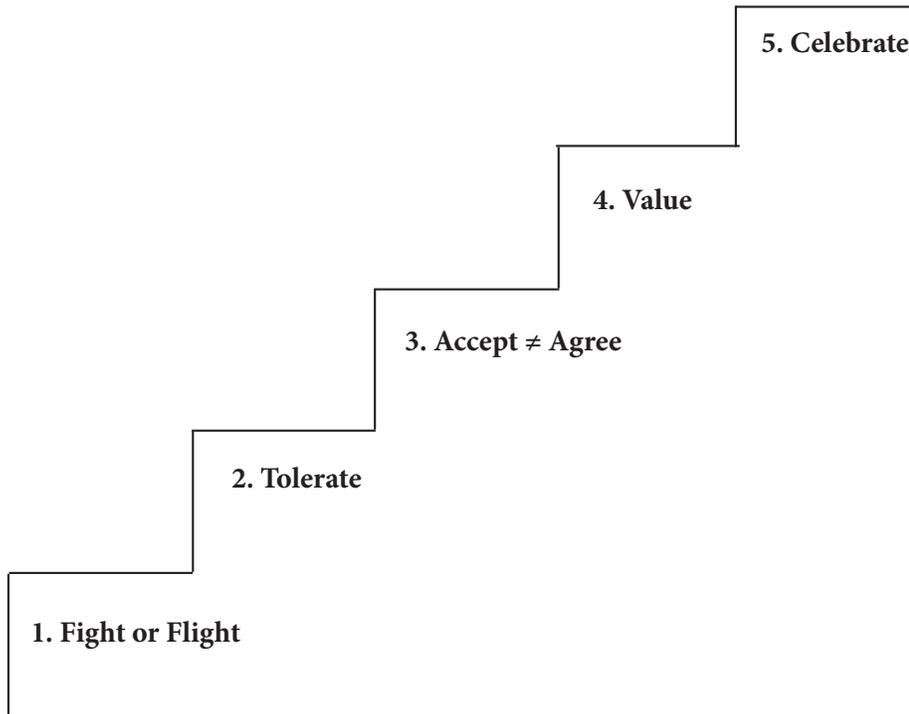
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Diversity Staircase

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                                                    │ 5. Celebrate
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                                         │ 4. Value
                              ┌──────────┘
                              │ 3. Accept ≠ Agree
                   ┌──────────┘
                   │ 2. Tolerate
        ┌──────────┘
        │ 1. Fight or Flight
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1. Fight or Flight
A new person joins the organization and is put on a project team. An example of fight or flight would be some team members may decide to attack their ideas or ignore their ideas.

2. Tolerate
We might listen to the new person's ideas but not do anything about their suggestions or thoughts.

3. Accept
We listen to their ideas, accepting that we have to work with them and they may have something to contribute. We are not yet at a point of valuing the differences, it is more of an attitude of compliance or forced cooperation.

4. Value
We honestly listen to the person. We value their ideas and opinions. We genuinely see that the new people have something to add to the project.

5. Celebrate
Here we proactively seek out other points of view because we understand and embrace the contributions that diverse thoughts bring to our project.

Exhibit 3: The Diversity Staircase