

Inclusion and Diversity Accelerate Innovation

by Kate Broer



Just this past spring, I wrote an opinion piece for *Canadian Lawyer* magazine's March edition on the topic of inclusion and diversity as an innovation driver. Inclusion and diversity accelerate innovation, particularly in a disrupted world where resisting change is not an option. At the time, perhaps none of us could have predicted (or wanted to predict) that we would find ourselves facing the greatest challenge of many of our lifetimes, where change is upon us in an unprecedented way; the need to innovate has never been greater; and it is all happening at breakneck speed.

Virtually nowhere in the world do we have the luxury of defaulting to the comfortable and less risky routines and sacred ways of doing things that we relied on in the pre-COVID-19 era. Working across skillsets and experiences to source different ideas; identify fresh approaches; and develop new solutions is now a necessity.

At the forefront, but by no means unique in the need for new solutions, has been the transition to agile working where we have all had to quickly learn and adapt with leaders setting the tone by communicating about their own experience; actively listening to learn of the challenges that others face; and creating safe places for essential discourse to support productive change.

The critical role that inclusive leadership plays in fostering solutions cannot be overstated as we navigate our way to our next normal.

We have and do spend a great deal of time in the Innovation Age talking about technology and digitization disrupting industry. We all feel the challenges as the world grows increasingly complex and as we learn to coexist with technology in ways we couldn't have conceived.

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grander scale than ever before. The key, though, is to turn that demand into energy in environments that encourage productive discourse and sharing of ideas, which in turn, breed new ways of doing things.

The overwhelming evidence supports that, effectively actuated through inclusion, diverse teams are more productive, process information more carefully, and perform far better than homogenous teams. This is now so well known it has become almost uncontroversial. But how do we ignite the power of inclusion and diversity in order to innovate?

Orthodoxies stemming from an organization's culture can keep it operating and making decisions in the same way, and can lead to stagnation. External orthodoxies can also hamper progress, keeping entire industries mired in the way things have always been done. These can create "a reassuring but false sense of security, even as the sands of disruption shift beneath the organization," as Bansi Nagji and Helen Walters wrote in "Flipping Orthodoxies: Overcoming Insidious Obstacles to Innovation."

Those equipped to treat every aspect of what they do as open to scrutiny and who see challenge as a positive action are the ones most likely to emerge as industry disrupters and leaders. Inclusive and diverse teams can help challenge orthodoxies and break free from the old ways of thinking and acting.

By challenging accepted views, inclusion and diversity can help build resilient, flexible and creative organizations that are better positioned to succeed in the constantly evolving marketplace. Truly inclusive and diverse organizations have the advantage of bringing multiple perspectives and broader knowledge to bear on both routine and complex decision-making.

Most industries also recognize that subjecting proposed solutions to critical analysis reveals their strengths and weaknesses. Subjecting ideas to the kind of discourse that truly tests their strength is more difficult in insular environments where the scope of inquiry is limited by uniform experience and knowledge.

Diverse teams bring substantially more raw knowledge on more varied topics and can offer new ways of looking at the same issues. An inclusive mindset invites a range of ideas to the table, along with the opportunity to combine approaches, values and experiences into something new. These new concepts are, in turn, subjected to deeper critical analysis from the many perspectives testing their validity.

Those who tenaciously pursue an inclusion and diversity strategy are reaping the benefits, with people at all levels engaging in more meaningful discourse and driving better outcomes. So, why isn't everyone doing it and why are some organizations better at it than others?

It can be hard work. Ensuring discourse does not quickly and irreversibly turn to discord when different views are introduced requires each of us to work outside our own comfort zone, and accept and embrace the views of others. Tension and discomfort are the hallmarks of a productive group, where diverse views are aired and examined, and brought together to shape something new.

When formerly sacred ways of doing things are questioned, perhaps for the first time in an organization's history, and when ideas are challenged, our first inclination may be to defend those sacred ways for fear that the inability to continue to support them will leave us looking foolish for having stuck with them for so long. This alone can create tension that can be perceived as conflict. Even when someone asks "why" — simply to understand rather than to challenge — the potential for misunderstanding rather than learning emerges. Many shy away from conflict, and the presence of diversity within the group can exacerbate this tendency where there is uncertainty about how different genders and cultures may express and handle conflict. It is a natural reaction and we have to challenge ourselves to ensure that conflict can be seen as a positive condition.

We also must consider that people are generally resistant to change, particularly in a work environment where routine is comfortable and less risky. Those suggesting new approaches are not always welcome; and presenting and dissecting new ideas takes courage. Given the many risks involved with just staying afloat in a competitive world, it is no wonder many organizations are reluctant to invite the complexity, uncertainty and tension that come with greater diversity and inclusion. However, in our disruptive world, where innovation has become an absolute necessity, resisting change is not an option.

Learning to harness the tension into productive energy by actively listening and communicating to reduce misunderstanding and create safe places for constructive conflict are essential. Leaders must set the tone through words and actions, impressing on everyone how critical diversity and inclusion are to success, establishing inclusion and diversity as a pillar of their business strategy, and drawing a clear line to support implementation.



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