

Integrating Diversity with Effective Group Processes and Mindset for More Productive Teams, Committees, Task Forces, and PLCs

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Abstract

Effective utilization of diversity results in more productive teams, committees, task forces, and PLCs in schools and school districts. Meaningful utilization of diversity builds stakeholder commitment, fosters collaboration, and improves problem-solving and innovation. Integrating diversity with effective group processes and an outward mindset of administrators, teacher leaders, and staff further augments productive teams, committees, task forces, and PLCs.

Keywords: diversity; effective group processes; outward mindset; more productive teams, committees, task forces, and PLCs

Often when teams, committees, task forces, or PLCs are assembled, membership is primarily based on the knowledge and skill sets of the selected individuals in relationship to the task at hand. Equally important is establishing a diverse group of individuals representative of various viewpoints and perspectives. At first blush, many people view diversity to only include factors such as race, ethnicity, age, and gender—relatively easy to visually identify. While these variables in part represent diversity, there are many more factors such as thinking styles, ideologies, and values which are also indicative of diversity. Sometimes the perspective is that a school or district does not have much diversity if, for example, it is mostly homogeneous regarding race and ethnicity because it is a majority white, black, or brown. When a school or district commits itself to maximizing diversity in decision-making, it will begin to realize that it already has some diversity. It may take awareness training for staff to realize existing diversity, but diversity is there in some form in every school/district. The challenge is to use it!

Diversity's Workforce Context

Effective work teams, committees, task forces, and PLCs generally have at least three major components: (1) purpose, (2) effective use of human capital (people), and (3) operating in a comprehensive manner such that diversity is viewed as being inclusive in the context of assuring participation by a variety of members to maximize the various perspectives brought to the table. As used here, diversity in the workforce is:

- understanding that there are differences among staff and these differences, if properly managed, are an asset to work being done more efficiently and effectively,
- understanding that differences among staff create a more diversified workforce, with a broader range of perspectives and attributes,
- capturing the richness of differences of a staff and harnessing them for the betterment of staff and the school or school district to make better decisions and improve student learning,
- understanding that people are different and if properly nurtured and cultivated, these differences are a positive force,
- striving to create a work culture that is heterogeneous and utilizes maximum participation of all individuals to their full potential, and
- demonstrating mutual respect, acceptance of others, and the desire to work for the common good of the school or school district.

Ultimately, people in the workforce must be able to interact and work effectively with others that they may initially view as “different” for a variety of reasons.

The effective use of diversity helps build stakeholder commitment and identity within the school or school district. Diversity's goal is *inclusion*. This inclusion of staff from various groups and perspectives must be authentic and meaningfully involve them in the decision-making processes to address the issues at hand. “Tokenism” is not only ineffective, but quite frankly, offensive. Inclusion needs to focus on building collaboration for problem solving and striving to prompt innovative outcomes through maximizing human capital.

Today the media often considers affirmative action in employment, efforts to eliminate bias and prejudice in the workplace, and racial and ethnic issues as the extent of “diversity.” For example, a recent chart, in the *Wall Street Journal*, on changing demographics in the U.S. described the racial and ethnic geographical changes as “diversity.” The aforementioned factors are all important in creating a situation for which diversity can flourish, but in reality are not all that constitute diversity. Certainly many homogeneous, nearly all-white schools/districts need to do more to employ staff of color (only 7% of public school teachers are black and just 2% of them male (Will, 2016, p. 7). This is the start of diversity, not the ultimate desired end result which is inclusion. Diversity means taking what are actual differences among staff and creating a “oneness” in which contributions from all are encouraged and authentic consideration is given regardless of the person's uniqueness. In reality, diversity should often be called inclusion. As Derven (2016) states, “Diversity means inviting a mix of people to the party (e.g., committee) while inclusion means everyone dances together (e.g., meaningfully participates) at the party” (p. 56).

A major step in a school or district to effectively utilize existing diversity is to understand specifically what diversity means and embrace creating a work environment that will prompt it to

flourish. True diversity causes staff to collaborate on problem-solving and create new approaches to enhance student learning.

Effective Group Processes

To maximize the impact of diversity when working with a team, committee, task force, or PLCs, administrators and teacher leaders need to incorporate effective group practices. Examples include the following:

- making sure certain members have the opportunity for equal time to express their views and give input,
- creating an environment that encourages participation and prompts participants to feel free to give differing viewpoints,
- striving to create a climate of respect,
- understanding that good ideas can come from anyone, regardless of a participant's formal position or uniqueness,
- creating an environment of authenticity and free dialogue,
- “de-individualizing” group members to lose personal identity and merge themselves into a cohesive unit as an effective work group,
- striving to create “group drive” (energy, enthusiasm, and strong commitment to working collaboratively with others to achieve the group's goals),
- clarifying members' roles, eliminating competition within the group, and facilitating early on the establishment of a plan for how the group will operate on the specific tasks needed to accomplish each goal, including a timeline, and
- acting as a gatekeeper to make sure the group stays on course, prevent certain members from dominating, block antagonism and aggression, and seek out input from members apprehensive to contribute. (Bass & Bass, 2008, pp. 756-785)

Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* also gives guidance for administrators and teacher leaders for maximizing diversity's effectiveness with teams, committees, task forces, and PLCs. Specifically, efforts should focus on the following beliefs:

- members having enough trust in each other to openly share past experiences and current thoughts,
- removal of the fear of conflict so members do not “hold back” from participating,
- gaining commitment so members believe in the purpose and goals to be achieved and fully support them,
- a willingness for members and the group as a whole to be accountable for their actions and findings/recommendations, and
- an unwavering belief in the group members' ability to achieve the goals of the group even if it could have a negative impact on how they are personally viewed. (2002, pp. 195-220)

It is important to note there is often a need for group members to have a “social dimension” met in order to enhance identity and a passion to be an ongoing motivated group member. This social dimension is sometimes referred to as the group's emotional intelligence

(Druskat & Wolff, 2013). Therefore, occasional activities that prompt meaningful social interactions among group members to enjoy the company of one another through meals and break times are important to enhancing interpersonal understanding and better appreciation of others' perspectives. While such activities may seem to counter the need to accomplish tasks, in the long run they will actually benefit task attainment.

Outward Mindset

Administrators or teacher leaders working with groups need to have an “outward mindset.” As used here mindset is the way people see and regard the world—how they see others, circumstances, challenges, opportunities, and obligations (The Arbinger Institute, 2016). This includes those leading a group serving as facilitators to help others “be their best” in making contributions. An outward mindset represents a focus on the impact a person has on being inclusive of others, as opposed to being “self-focused” and promoting oneself at the expense of others. This has some similarity to Dweck’s (2006) growth mindset which advocates change, innovation, and positivity in the context of developing new ideas. A major difference, though, is that the outward mindset’s focus is totally on others, whereas Dweck’s growth mindset focuses more on the individual. With respect to the outward mindset, administrators and teacher leaders act as facilitators prompting participants to not focus on themselves and their vested interests, but rather to work for the common good of the group, be productive, and achieve the group’s goals. Other specific attributes of the outward mindset are:

- fostering a climate in which others are fully engaged and have a sense of responsibility,
- working collaboratively with others to solicit their inputs so as to maximize their unique perspectives and then striving to develop the best collective solutions to the group’s goals,
- creating an environment in which people develop a “committed behavior” collectively with others to solve problems,
- considering the needs and wants of others to foster satisfaction and motivation in them,
- bonding with others through establishing positive relationships to foster cooperation, and
- viewing challenges to the group leader’s perspectives as positive and likely making the leader—and group members—more productive and hence enhance solutions for problem solving.

Summary

So much can be added to the outcomes or work products of teams, committees, task forces, and PLCs by effectively utilizing diversity. And coupling diversity with effective group processes and tenets of an outward mindset in those leading—as well as the group members—will prompt a collaborative environment and a sense of “oneness” among participants that will enhance goal attainment and more effective problem solutions for the group.

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