

Diversity: Are brown eyes better than blue?

By Rick Maier

A school teacher in a small farming community in Iowa decided to give her all white, all Christian third graders a little taste of discrimination.

On the first day of the experiment she divided her class into two groups based on eye color. She told the blue-eyed children that they were smarter, cleaner and more civilized. She extended their recess time, allowed them to have lunch first, praised them often and granted them special privileges.

She put cloth collars around the necks of the brown-eyed students and took every opportunity to criticize them for being slow, wasteful and lazy. The blue-eyed students were encouraged to keep their distance from the "brown eyes". Both groups were tested to measure how they were doing during the day.

The students reacted quickly and emotionally - from anger and hostility to withdrawal and resentment. One brown-eyed boy beat up a blue-eyed boy who just the day before was his good friend. The blue-eyed kids became smug, and one of them later said he felt like a king.

The following day the teacher switched to favoring the brown-eyed students, and the responses were completely reversed. Scores for the brown-eyed students improved dramatically, while results for the blue-eyed students declined significantly.

At the end of the second day the teacher helped the students understand their experience and re-establish their friendships. Weeks after the experiment all the children scored better on their tests, indicating that the exercise itself helped improve learning.

At their fifteen-year reunion, the former students vividly recalled the exercise, and reported that the episode changed their outlook on life.

Getting pro-active

We judge people by all sorts of things to do with their looks or background. Unless you've lived a very sheltered life, you have probably been a victim of discrimination for reasons such as being left-handed, not drinking, or being short. I often feel judged or even dismissed because I wasn't born in Georgia.

Managers of most organizations have moved past discrimination and become open minded enough to ignore the differences of race, nationality, religion or gender. But achieving diversity - without quotas or affirmative action - requires a special effort. It's more about creating an inclusive culture than just avoiding litigation. In order to *embrace* diversity you've got to rock the boat and risk breaking some china.

Why is it important to have a diverse organization? Diverse teams are much more productive and fun. A homogeneous group may be comfortable, but you lose the variety and complement of talents. It goes for nations too - the US out-performs other countries because a tossed salad with a variety of ingredients is better than plain old lettuce.

A diverse team can appeal to a wider range of customers over a larger geographic area – you can provide non-English speaking sales support or market to ethnic customer segments. You can better attract and retain talented employees and suppliers, especially in hard-to-find fields and tight labor markets. Maintaining variety in your organization is not only the right thing to do, it increases your return on investment.

Action steps

A good way to increase the level of diversity and cooperation in your organization is to study the behavior of others. Hold a study session after hours and watch the PBS documentary *A Class Divided* on eye color (that I referred to above), or movies such as *A Family Thing* that deal with race, or *Phenomenon* that deal with unusual people. Have a trained facilitator lead the group in discussion.

The most common reason for not having a diverse team is the lack of variety in the applicant pool for open positions. This is where a little creative leadership is needed. Don't lower your standard, just search a little harder or pay a little more to recruit people with different backgrounds.

Once you mix it up, diversity will perpetuate on its own.

If you hire people like yourself, you get redundancy. If you surround yourself with a variety of people, you get new experiences, different perspectives and synergistic talents.

You may even warm up to brown-eyed people from Delaware.

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