

DIVERSITY BRIEF: INVISIBLE DIFFERENCES

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“It’s one thing to numerically integrate a setting. It’s another thing to make that place a place where everyone feels comfortable and can flourish. Organizations must get beneath the surface to make this happen.” - Clair, Beatty, and Maclean (1995)

Introduction

Explicit differences that are usually observable include gender, age, race, & ethnicity. Invisible differences lie beneath the surface and include aspects such as personal belief systems, income, and sexuality or education background. Both visible & invisible differences encompass the diversity of an individual, and they both impact leadership & organizational dynamics. Three dimensions of this concept discussed here include:

- A Deeper Look at Diversity
- Contextual Implications
- True Inclusivity

A Deeper Look at Diversity

To understand an individual fully is to understand all aspects of who they are, including underlying values, learning styles, and other aspects that make us unique. Often understanding these aspects also helps us bridge connections of what makes us similar or alike. Individuals may connect with each other on dimensions that may not seem obvious based on appearance. Invisible differences can also lead to invisible barriers, which in turn can be easier to ignore & hold individuals back. Therefore a broader definition of diversity must encompass both aspects, and the opportunity to push beyond the surface.

Contextual Implications

Depending on the context, a particular difference may have a

stronger or lesser impact on the identity of the individual. For example, one’s citizenship status may be of more significance in a foreign country, particularly if there are negative stereotypes about that citizenship. However, that same citizenship may be an advantage in the home country. Dimensions of our identity are brought to the surface depending on contextual factors and how they play out, and one must be aware of the dynamic nature of how our identity shifts.

True Inclusivity

Focusing on invisible differences shifts the discussion around inclusion from “How can we increase gender and racial diversity?” to “Do we have the variety of diverse perspectives necessary to deal with complex problems and create innovative solutions?” Although it is important to increase the numbers of minorities within organizations, it is not enough by itself. It will also be important to really understand whether these groups are engaging in diverse thinking & interactions across different perspectives & belief systems. People can bring forth these various perspectives in safe & trusting environments where conflict & diverging opinions are accepted. Rather than expending energy suppressing who they are as unique individuals, they can raise the group’s collective energy by bringing forward their hidden & explicit perspectives.

Examples of Invisible Differences

- Personal Belief Systems
- Values
- Cultural Perspectives
- Religion
- Learning disabilities
- Leadership style
- Position & title
- Parental status
- Income
- Geographic location
- Sexuality
- Education background

Coaching & Training Strategies

There are practical and important strategies that can be adopted to bring invisible differences to the surface. They include:

- Learning to ask open-ended questions & listening for what is beneath the surface
- Naming examples of invisible & visible differences
- Creating safety and trust for people to share openly
- Exercises where people who may not look like you reveal they are similar to you beneath the surface
- Discussion of personal values & organizational alignment or misalignment