

## Voice or heard?



Weekly Learnings 16 / 2023

I was in Colombo last week for a board meeting and one of the people in a meeting asked me about D E I. Here are my thoughts on D E I.

My argument is that employees need to be heard over and above having a voice.

D E I is the most touted acronym in organizations and society and stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

We have measures for diversity and feelings and emotions around Equity and Inclusion.

Most organizations think Diversity leads to better equity and inclusion. That's not true.

Organizations think diversity is simply the ratio of women they employ. Diversity is much more than that, if one considers diversity in terms of education, socioeconomic background, nationalities, etc.

When a team is heterogeneous, it's diverse, however, heterogeneity is a challenge in terms of communication. The leader needs to ensure that a common lexicon develops for shared understanding. Homogeneous teams are better at understanding each other because they are similar in thought processes. For example, a team of chartered accountants understand each other, and their language is similar.

Equity is often misunderstood as equality. Equality is when everyone is treated equally but equity is when that treatment is person specific. Let me explain. If you make learning and development opportunities available to all employees in your team, then that's equality. However, if you tailor the learning and development specific to each team member then that's equity.

The challenge is that most organizations and teams are inclusive. Inclusion is the act of including people as part of a group. A company that is inclusive will have diversity and equity but not the other way around. Every organization says people have a voice, but the people ask if their voice is heard. My experience is that good competent people don't boast

and average to poor performers talk a lot more. The performers believe that their work speaks for them.

In companies, smaller functions typically don't get heard at higher levels, like audit, tax, compliance, sustainability, and process excellence. In companies' women don't get heard in the same way that men are heard. In companies, newcomers are not heard compared to existing employees. Revenue-generating functions get heard while support functions need to punch above their voice.

If leaders want inclusion, then they need to suspend their own views in meetings and invite people on the team to voice their opinion before giving their own perspectives.

If leaders want inclusion, then they need to deliberately seek out people different from themselves. There is a tendency for leaders to have people like themselves in acts and thoughts. In a sense, this is what one can call people like us vs people unlike us. We see the behavior on this variable most in social media where one sees digitally gated communities (DGCs) aligning around a common message and different opinions are trolled down. Thanks to social media, teams can end up with this behavior at the workplace and good leaders need to guard against this.

Building inclusion when someone is heard results in an improvement in trust.

An inclusive culture in the team gets a broader range of options than non-inclusive teams.

The danger with too much inclusion is listening to the wrong type of team member. Guard against that since appeasing the wrong type loses trust in the leader from others.

So, the challenge in organizations is not a diversity ratio, it is the ability for people to voice their opinion and the feeling that they have been heard.

Giving people an ear to their voices is key for D E I.

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