As I See It

Inclusion and Diversity, My View

By Menzer Pehlivan, PhD, PE, M.ASCE

I nclusion and diversity (I&D) might seem like buzzwords to many, a checkbox for some, and a legal necessity for others. Businesses started talking about I&D in the late 1990s, following some major lawsuits that initially disturbed the financial industry. What began as an effort to prevent upcoming lawsuits, I&D today is a proven business strategy that benefits our business. Despite the proven benefits of I&D, why are we still struggling to create an inclusive environment that engages diverse talent in our industry? The answer might be missing the key to activate the true power of diversity: **inclusion.**

I&D or D&I?

There are many ways to explain and define I&D. The description that resonates most strongly with me is from diversity advocate Vernā Myers: "*Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.*" However, I prefer revising this statement slightly to truly clarify what we mean by diversity: *Diversity is inviting dancers with different dance styles to the party; inclusion is empowering them to dance.* Although small, this modification is important. Diversity has many layers, beyond what's visible to the eye. Inviting the people who might *look* different but dance the way we prefer, would continue an expectation of assimilation, and exclude others who could make the party more diverse and joyous. It's no different when it comes to our industry, such that true benefits of diversity can only be achieved through an inclusive environment where authentic diversity is encouraged and valued.

The opportunity of a diverse team lies in the available knowledge and perspective of its members. Diverse

Without inclusion, diversity alone cannot bring value to a team or company.

team members often share a smaller common knowledge when compared to that of a homogenous team, but greater potential for collective knowledge if individual experiences are shared. An inclusive management becomes the key element that can turn the individual knowledge of diverse team members into an expansive and shared team knowledge. Teams that can activate the collective knowledge become a greater asset for critical decision-making, creativity, and innovation compared to a homogenous team. I prefer ordering the phrase with inclusion leading the thought — "inclusion and diversity" rather than "diversity and inclusion." Because without inclusion, diversity alone cannot bring value to a team or company.
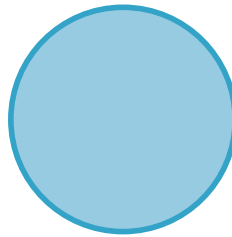
Reaching Through the Layers
Diversity has many layers and extends far beyond what is visible on the surface. While race, gender, and sexual orientation are typical starting places when we think about diversity, there are other crucial layers of diversity
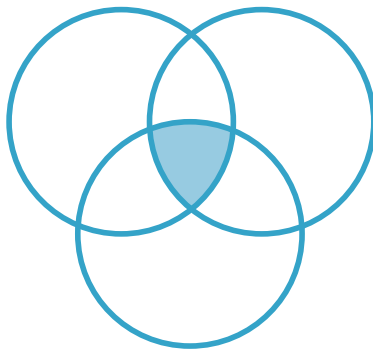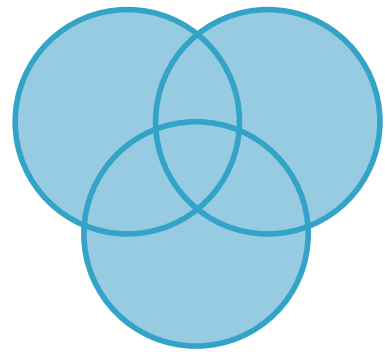
**Diverse
teams**
A diverse store
of knowledge is
partly shared.

**Homogenous
teams**
A common store
of knowledge is
fully shared.

**Inclusive
teams**
A diverse store
of knowledge is
fully shared.

Inclusion: How diversity wins. Reprinted with permission from "Begin with Trust" by Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss. *Harvard Business Review,* May 2020. Copyright 2020 by Harvard Business Publishing; all rights reserved.

that require attention as we manage diverse teams. I will focus on cultural and generational diversity that play an important role in shaping the way one behaves, thinks, and interacts — and yet can often be overlooked.

Cultural inclusion and diversity play an important role in a connected world. Our culture shapes how we behave, interact, communicate, and perceive others. Understanding and celebrating cultural differences and being able to interact cross-culturally requires cultural intelligence, a crucial skill for next-generation leaders if they want to be successful in the ever-globalizing world. Cultural intelligence helps leaders differentiate between what is universal, cultural, or personal when they interact with others, which enables them to manage more inclusively, build trust among the team members, motivate teams, and solve conflicts that may arise from cultural differences. Cultural inclusion is a key for all team members to feel accepted, included, and valued and for them to be able to bring their

whole selves to the workplace. Teams with cultural diversity can be very effective in diversifying collective knowledge and perspectives, leading to more effective and collaborative decision-making when managed inclusively.

We live in a unique era where the workforce can encompass up to four generations. Each generation has its own characteristics, needs, style, and ambitions. Generational inclusion becomes a critical factor in successfully attracting, managing, and bringing out the best of a generationally diverse workforce. In an experience-driven industry like ours, including a generationally diverse pool of talent in the managerial positions is often a challenge, but doing it well presents an opportunity. While our industry's leadership might not depict generational diversity, leaders should be receptive to the needs and characteristics of younger generations to create an inclusive environment and to attract and retain the top talent. For example, a senior Baby Boomer or

Gen X leader, who has worked fixed hours for most of his/her career, should be receptive to flexible schedules and distributed working, which are preferred by Millennial and Gen Z employees. Similarly, unlike the vertical career progression that has been embodied in our industry through past generations, the need for lateral career growth — which allows Millennial and Gen Z employees to wear multiple hats and advance more quickly within their careers — should be recognized.

Cultural and generational I&D benefits organizations by providing new and different approaches to problem-solving and decision making, relating to the needs of different target audiences, and multigenerational and multicultural learning and mentoring opportunities. The value that cultural and generational I&D brings to decision making is illustrated in a Cloverpop research study that compares the percentage of time when better decisions were made by teams with different levels of diversity.

According to this study, teams with age, gender, and cultural diversity make a better decision 87 percent of the time, whereas this percentage drops down to 80 percent for teams with gender and age diversity, 73 percent for teams with only gender diversity, and 58 percent for all-male teams.

Building inclusive teams of diverse talent starts with building trust. There are three core drivers for building trust — logic, authenticity, and empathy — however, these drivers look different for various generations and different cultures. For example, building trust for Millennials and Gen Zs requires viewing traditional leadership models with new glasses by shifting the focus from the traditional leader-centric approach to the team empowerment through a leader's presence. Moreover, cultures affect the way trust is built;

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some cultures develop trust by working on a task together, while others build trust by bonding through personal relationships. A leader should have high emotional and cultural intelligence to effectively manage diverse teams to bring out the true power of diversity.

Let's Get the Show on the Road

As leaders, what can we do to build a more inclusive and diverse industry? Recent studies show that mandatory diversity training, diverse hiring tests, or even performance-based employee evaluations are not the solution. None of these methods overcome the unconscious bias, a main roadblock to inclusive leadership. The solution is a personal one that requires each of us to recognize our own unconscious biases and actively work to overcome them. One of the most effective ways

of overcoming unconscious bias is by building relationships with others who are different from us, which can be done through mentoring and coaching. This way we can move away from the paradigm of "treating everyone the way *we* want to be treated" toward a more inclusive paradigm of "treating everyone the way *they* want to be treated."

Inclusive leadership starts with us creating equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of their differences, and empowering each person to use their differences as their strengths. As we move into the future of work, inclusive leadership should be the new normal and a key lever for attracting, engaging, and retaining top talent and for achieving competitive advantage, high performance, and business success. Let's be intentional, hold each other accountable, build trust, and work

together to make I&D the core feature of our geoprofession, recognizing that our unique differences collectively make us stronger. **GS**

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