

Differences Matter! A Diversity & Inclusion Exercise

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how individual traits and identities impact behavior and performance in organizations is an important topic in numerous management courses and necessary for current and future employees and managers. In this session we share an exercise that helps students better understand the components of diversity in organizations, the role of stereotypes and biases in impacting individuals' behavior and the use of inclusive processes to maximize the connection between diversity and organizational effectiveness. Join us for this interactive session as we explore one way for our students to gain insight and appreciation into the many benefits of diversity and inclusion.

Key Words: diversity, stereotypes, experiential learning

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A fundamental matter in organizations is understanding how diversity impacts individual and group behavior and performance in organizations. Though students tend to understand that each of them brings unique traits and experiences to our classrooms and any group or organization they are a part of, they seem to not completely comprehend that there are several layers of diversity impacting perceptions of self and others and how these perceptions impact their treatment of others and subsequent behaviors. This exercise provides students with a means of identifying the layers of diversity and the impact of stereotypes, assumptions and biases on behavior, while gaining an appreciation for the benefits of diversity and inclusion for organizational effectiveness. It can be used in undergraduate or graduate classes with any mix of traditional and nontraditional students and with any delivery method (face-to-face, fully online, or blended).

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

With the continued increase in diversity in organizations, it is imperative that our students are prepared to not only understand but appreciate the differences among individuals at all levels in the workforce. People learn best through experience, which is at the heart of experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). When students are able to apply course material to their own lives, it provides added motivation to learn and helps them internalize the material. Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This exercise meets these standards for effective learning. Students learn about the diverse identities of their classmates and relate personal observations and experiences throughout the exercise so that it will be engaging and meaningful to them. In coordination with their classmates, they gain

an appreciation for the impact of positive and negative stereotypes and biases and explore ways to build a culture of inclusion in current and future groups and teams – efforts which will likely impact their future behavior. This embodies the learning cycle where the student experiences, reflects, thinks, and acts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and helps develop talent and intuitive know-how, which are only developed through idiosyncratic experiences and learning processes involved in applying generic skills (McIver, Fitzsimmons, & Flanagan, 2016).

Learning Objectives

The specific learning objectives to meet the overall goal of helping students understand the links among diversity, inclusion and organizational effectiveness are:

- Differentiate the four layers of diversity with special attention to surface- and deep-level dimensions of diversity;
- Explain how people form stereotypes, assumptions and biases and how managers can address their impact;
- Explore how diverse identities contribute to individual and team performance; and,
- Discuss successful organizational practices to effectively manage diversity and inclusion.

Exercise Overview

This exercise takes about 60 to 75 minutes to execute. Because it consists of multiple parts, it can be adapted across multiple shorter class sessions. The required materials include:

- large, empty wall space;
- blank Post-it or ‘sticky’ notes;
- masking tape;
- marker or pen for each student;
- small sheets of paper; and,

- paper or electronic copies of the group and individual assignments.

Prior to class, students explore a general definition of diversity, the layers of diversity, the importance of understanding demographics to better appreciate diversity, and the formation and maintenance of stereotypes through assigned reading. After a brief review of the main points in the reading, we engage our students in a discussion of their membership in various groups across our institution (e.g., athletics, academic majors, clubs, religious / spiritual groups, etc.) and the similarities and differences among members of these groups. We then explain that our exercise will consist of three parts (outlined below): 1) a mapping of the similarities and differences across several identities for students in our class; 2) exploration of how our identities and the stereotypes associated with them make a difference in how people are treated in various settings, impacting both the individual and the organization; and, 3) reflection upon students' experiences in diverse teams, and how surface and deep diversity positively impact team performance.

Part I: Snapshot of Students in Class – We ask each student to write their own identity for each category identified in Appendix A on a separate Post-it note for each category. Some of these categories are considered to be 'surface' identities (i.e., individual did not choose their identity), whereas others are considered 'deep' identities (i.e., individual had some choice in the identity and/or how it plays out in their life). The categories can be changed to make them more relevant to your institution and student characteristics and depending on the surface and deep diversity identities the instructor wants to highlight. As students are writing their own identity on the Post-it notes, we post pieces of paper, one for each identity category, horizontally across the top of a wall in our classroom. We ask students to post each of their responses (no names in order to preserve anonymity) on the wall horizontally, underneath the appropriate diversity

category. Once all notes are posted, students take a ‘gallery walk’ to view each person’s profile. We then ask students to tell us their thoughts, perceptions, anything surprising / not surprising as they read the responses. Students usually say that there was more diversity among their classmates than they perceived prior to the exercise and have an enlightened appreciation for their classmates.

Part II: Exploring Identities and Associated Stereotypes – In this part of the exercise we explore: a) how our identities and the identities of our colleagues are impacted by the stereotypes, assumptions and biases we carry relevant to various categories, and b) how our stereotypes, assumptions and biases impact others and goal achievement. Through interactive discussion, we review basic definitions of stereotypes (i.e., generalized conceptions of a particular identity), assumptions (i.e., taken-for-granted feelings or perceptions we have about something) and biases (i.e., conscious or unconscious opinions we have about others). We then provide students multiple small sheets of paper to write their responses to our next series of questions. Our goal is to complete Table 1 provided in Appendix B to guide our discussion of stereotypes, how we treat people with that stereotype, how that person feels based on how we treat them, how that person acts or behaves as a result of our treatment, how we perceive their actions, and the impact on a team organization as a result of this process. Using a few identities gathered in Part I, we ask students to write down one positive and one not-so-positive stereotype, assumption or bias frequently associated with the group of people having the identity. We collect their responses and use them to complete the first column of Table 1. Appendix B provides an example of how the table was completed in class. During our class discussion we ask students for their observations, whether or not they have experienced or seen something similar unfold at our institution, and how they can encourage the positive outcomes and reduce the potential

negative outcomes. Our students usually identify the process outlined through the table as a ‘self-fulfilling’ cycle; that is, treating someone in a positive manner results in productive and admired behavior, whereas treating someone poorly and with disrespect results in negative and counterproductive behavior. We discuss how students can minimize not-so-positive assumptions and biases and encourage others to do the same.

Part III: Diversity’s Impact on Teams – Students assemble in small groups and explore how surface and deep layers of diversity played a role in past team performance by completing the Diversity’s Impact on Teams – Group Portion of the exercise (see Appendix C). We ask each student to think of a successful team they have been on in the past while considering the team’s purpose, number of team members, and the team’s particular success (e.g., won an athletic event, raised money for a charity, got an A on a class project). After each student in the group shares their example, the group selects one team scenario to complete the assignment. Through their completion of the table in the exercise, students differentiate surface from deep level diversity characteristics and provide adjectives to describe the key characteristics they believe contributed to the success of the diverse team. Upon completion of the table, we ask students to reflect on the scenario and contemplate why the team was successful by briefly discussing the following questions:

1. How might the team’s outcome have been impacted if there was no diversity in at least two of the deep diversity categories?
2. How might the team’s outcome have been impacted if there was no surface level diversity?
3. Discuss the importance of diversity in teams and organizations and how to make sure that individuals feel included and are celebrated because of the diversity they bring.

We then ask each student to independently complete the Diversity's Impact on Teams – Individual Portion (see Appendix D) in order to provide time for individual reflection.

Once all students have submitted this assignment, we pose the following questions to insure that students adequately reflect on their findings during the exercise, make accurate connections to course concepts and are able to apply what they learned to larger considerations such as:

- the extent to which students think our institutional diversity impacts the achievement of our institution's mission and values;
- whether or not we can get rid of or at least reduce stereotypes, assumptions and biases? If so, how? If not, why not? [The key answer here is that we generally cannot eliminate stereotypes, but we can be aware of the stereotypes and biases we have and make conscious choices about how we act on them.];
- the practical things we can do to foster the optimization of the concepts we talked about during the class; and,
- how students can be an ally with someone who may be experiencing less-than-positive treatment due to a group membership or identity.

Oftentimes experiential exercises are not thoroughly debriefed (Dennehy, Sims & Collins, 1998), and the impact of the exercise on learning can get lost during the enjoyment of the activity. Thus, we make sure to take time to have these discussions and encourage future consideration of what students learned and internalized during the exercise. Our students tell us they truly enjoyed learning about the importance of diversity and inclusion through the three-part exercise, as they gained an appreciation for diversity they had not previously considered when observing classmates. They frequently refer back to the exercise and concepts learned and discussed

throughout the semester – a sign we interpret that our exercise did indeed provide examples of material they read prior to coming to class, impacted their thought processes when considering organizational behavior and human resource management issues for organizations discussed through the rest of the course, and for some, changed how they interact with people having diverse backgrounds and identities.

The exercise outlined above is the format for face-to-face delivery; however, it can be easily adapted for hybrid or online courses.

Session Description

The basis for this 60-minute session will be interactive dialogue as we do an actual ‘walk-through’ of the exercise with participants. First, we will provide a 10 – 15 minute introduction of participants and overview of the exercise (see Appendices A through D for a copy of the materials we will distribute to participants). The next 30 minutes will consist of participants ‘partnering’ with each other to complete the exercise. Upon reconvening as a group, we will use the remaining time (10 – 15 minutes) to discuss our approach to debriefing the exercise, share student responses and reactions to it as a means of illustrating our success in enhancing students’ learning and suggest modifications for various course delivery systems. We hope that participants will leave the session with what they believe to be a valuable, experiential exercise they can add to their repertoire in their quest to enhance student learning. After all, isn’t that why we want to attend MOBTC and why we all try so hard?

References

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APPENDIX A

Part I – Snapshot of Students in Class

Categories of Diversity:

1. Race
2. Gender
3. Religion/spiritual beliefs
4. Geographic location they spent most of their upbringing
5. Family structure (e.g. 2-parent, single parent, foster, grandparent, etc.)
6. Socio-economic status growing up (under-resourced, middle-class, upper middle class, wealthy, etc.)
7. Number of siblings
8. Significant life experience that helped define who you are (e.g. death of close relative, living in a foreign country, etc.)
9. Personality (extravert, introvert, other)
10. Favorite hobby or pastime
11. Greatest strength in academics
12. Greatest strength when working in a team
13. Greatest interpersonal skill
14. Greatest strength when solving a problem

APPENDIX B

Part II – Exploring Identities and Associated Stereotypes

Table 1. Stereotypes, Treatment, Feelings, Actions, Perceptions and Impacts ***

STEREOTYPE	TREATMENT	FEELING	ACT/DO	PERCEPTION	IMPACT
Facilitator will ask participants to put themselves in the shoes of either a) someone who has the stereotype, or b) someone who experiences the stereotype	Participants will be asked to put themselves in the shoes of someone who has the stereotype.	Participants will be asked to put themselves in the shoes of someone who experiences the stereotype.	Participants will be asked to put themselves in the shoes of someone who experiences the stereotype.	Participants will be asked to put themselves in the shoes of someone who has the stereotype.	Participants will be asked to take a bird's eye view of the impact.
List one stereotype here.	Participants will contribute several.	Participants will contribute several.	Participants will contribute several.	Participants will contribute several.	Participants will contribute several.
List one stereotype here.					
List one stereotype here.					
List one stereotype here.					

*** Table can be drawn on an available writing surface in the classroom.

Example of Table Completion – We asked students to identify adjectives associated with individuals growing up in an under-resourced / lower socio-economic household and received positive responses such as ‘hardworking’ and ‘honest’ and not-so-positive responses such as ‘angry’ and ‘greedy’. Table 2 below illustrates how part of the table was completed. Specifically, if we have a stereotype, assumption or bias that an individual from a lower socio-economic household is angry, we might stay away from them and exclude them from events. As a result of being treated that way, they might not participate in tasks or complete the minimum required. When we see them act this way, we might perceive them as being a ‘slacker’, snobby, and uninterested. The impact for the group or team is that it never really comes together as a whole and there is less than optimal output and performance. However, if we view someone from this

household as hardworking, we speak nicely to them and include them in conversations and activities. As a result, they feel happy and part of the team, and their actions exemplify hard word and going above and beyond expectations. We perceive these actions as the individual being a team player and an asset to the team. As a result, the team is very productive and provides optimal output.

Table 2. Example of Complete Table

Stereotype	Treatment	Feeling	Act	Perception	Impact
Angry	Stay away from them; Speak sternly to them; Exclude them from events	Rejected Sad Afraid	Don't participate in tasks; Stay quiet in group settings; Complete minimum required and leave	Slacker Snob Timid Uninterested	Team never really 'comes together' as a whole; Less than optimal output
Hardworking	Include them; Speak nicely to them	Happy Included Part of team	Work hard; Go above and beyond requirements	Diligent; Team player; Asset to the team	Very productive team; Optimal output

