



USE DISSENT TO POWER UP INCLUSION!

How to include diverse voices in problem-solving talk

1. Audit your culture regularly. Minimise tendencies towards conformity at the expense of performance and innovation. Do this by promoting the importance of adopting a questioning mindset.
2. Recognise and reward those who spot problems, raise issues and contribute to all kinds of continuous improvement.
3. Actively promote the business benefits of high functioning teams. Equip team members with the skills and techniques that underpin genuine collaboration.
4. At senior levels (where a steady stream of sound decisions is vital), develop the ability to think well together. Do this through the use of a shared problem-solving and decision-making toolkit.
5. Broadcast the benefits of dissent, debate and open argument. Develop the skills needed to manage disagreement effectively. In this way, you'll minimise its interpersonal risk and maximise its powerful business advantage.

Where you work, is inclusion real or just an aspiration?

These days, you'd be hard pressed to find an organisation that *doesn't* have a stated commitment to diversity and inclusion. Publicly available statements about inclusive principles have become the norm across all sectors. As well, the link between diversity and innovation is broadly accepted, making it unnecessary to argue the point. But that's where things get stuck. What's involved in building an inclusive culture? What does 'inclusive leadership' actually mean in practice? If a manager wanted to demonstrate inclusive behaviours, what would they be doing? If you want to make sure your next meeting is inclusive, what skills and strategies would you need to implement?

A problem rarely acknowledged is that genuine inclusion of diverse perspectives means accepting that dissent is likely. If you're going to make space for diversity, you'll need the skills and tools to help you manage challenge and debate. You'll need to understand disagreement as a vital step on the way to eventual agreement. On paper, including multiple views can seem fairly straightforward. It sounds democratic, tolerant and – well – nice! And most people are well-intentioned towards others and like to think of themselves as decent. So inclusion as a broad principle can feel quite attractive.

Dissent isn't always comfortable – for either side!

But, in fact, people often become irritated when they have to listen to a dissenting view that puts at risk the comfortable collective harmony. For many managers running a meeting, it can even feel like a loss of control. Things could get unruly. What's going to happen, if we openly challenge each other, if we listen to another, possibly quite different, perspective, if we diverge from the 'script'? As well as jeopardising good relations, it might just take far too much time.

Flipping it round the other way, it can feel easier to agree with the prevailing view, whatever it is (even if you know it's wrong), and simply fit in, go along to get along and avoid making waves. Research has shown that, in many organisations, there can be negative repercussions for those who speak out about problems, express dissent or disagree with the majority view. They can legitimately fear being marginalised as foolish or branded as troublemakers. Either way, they can see their career progression compromised.

Organisational forces can suppress diverse perspectives

This reluctance to speak up and contribute a divergent view has damaging consequences for the organisation as well. Indeed, it's easy to think of examples of organisations (both private and public sector) where failure, serious error and even disaster

could have been averted, if only there had been an open airing of competing views and a genuine inclusion of those minority dissenting voices that predicted the trouble looming ahead. Researchers at New York University examining this phenomenon and its causes call it 'organizational silence'. But there is obviously an important distinction here between developing a strong, vibrant identity as an organisation and unwittingly creating a cult-like culture, where diversity of thought is outlawed and a dissenting voice automatically rejected. Promoting shared values, norms and procedures is one thing. Insisting on rigid conformity is another.

Dissenting voices promote better thinking even when wrong

All problem-solving talk is nourished by challenge, dissent and disagreement. Once decisions are made and the team (or organisation) moves into implementation, then unity, alignment of effort and a shared outlook become vital. But first, you need to make sure you're on the *right* page, without moving too quickly to being on the *same* page!

In numerous studies over the last twenty years, a research team at the University of California has consistently found that having to face the challenge of diverse views makes a team consider more possibilities, than when agreement is arrived at without the probing that comes from dissent.

Diverse views, confidently and consistently expressed, stimulate better quality thinking – even when this deeper reflection proves those views to be wrong. The benefits come from the open airing of ideas and the need to deal with challenges, rather than whether those challenges turn out to be right.

But just hiring for diversity won't give you these benefits, if there isn't a culture of questioning and if individuals don't have the skills to promote collaboration and manage disagreement. UGM filmed research has captured footage of demographically diverse teams engaged in problem-solving talk, where only the dominant few regular speakers contributed. The thinking was superficial and the resulting decisions poor quality. Such teams lack the basic skills of inclusion and cannot unlock the rich potential they possess.

Inclusion needs skills to make it real

It's hard to promote inclusion, if this principle is invoked without also providing the toolkit of skills and strategies that will bring it to life. Challenge, debate and questioning need to be positioned as vital contributions expected of all employees, whatever their level or role. Organisations sabotage business success, if they concentrate on harmony at the expense of performance and innovation. Diversity benefits don't occur of their own accord. For these reasons, inclusion can't simply be a principle. It must also become a practice.