

Coaching a Diverse Workforce: The Impact of Changing Demographics for Modern Leaders

Mark Lundrigan

Institute of International Studies
Ramkhamhaeng University
Bangkok, Thailand.

ValaipornTangsuvanich (Vikki)

Institute of International Studies
Ramkhamhaeng University
Bangkok, Thailand.

Li Yu

Institute of International Studies
Ramkhamhaeng University
Bangkok, Thailand.

Sixiao Wu (Sherry)

Institute of International Studies
Ramkhamhaeng University
Bangkok, Thailand.

Bahaudin G. Mujtaba

Professor of Management
H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship
Nova Southeastern University
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
United States of America

Abstract

Group demography is a very broad area or region of study. This paper focuses on four fundamental group distinctions that might be found in any contemporary company: age, religion, culture, and gender. Each dimension is explored in terms proliferation, potential challenges for managers and advantages to organizations. It is not the goal of this paper to submit that group diversity is undesirable. On the contrary, astute managers, leaders and coaches will be able utilize their team's attributes, however diverse, to mold a cohesive unit. Such a team will share a wealth of ability and experience. Properly managed, diversity in age, religion, culture, gender, and other similar dimensions can be very good for business in gaining a competitive advantage in terms of creativity, innovation, and understanding of current and prospective customers. Practical suggestions and recommendations for gaining such an edge through the human resources asset in the industry are provided for all professionals who are aspiring to become effective and developmental coaches.

Key words: Coaching, teams, leadership, diversity, age, gender, religion, and culture.

Introduction

Most modern workplaces can be likened to melting pots of humanity. Though suffused with talent and replete with potential, leadership of diverse teams is fraught with pitfalls that could cause irreparable damage to the team's morale, and to company survival. Brutal competition for market share has shaped a global arena in which the only path to continued survival is to become the best. Mediocrity is a corporate death sentence. Companies need to attract and retain the most talented human resources. Leaders have to coach them into a cohesive unit.

To succeed, coaches need to develop the skills to recognize inharmonious interrelations, averting degradation of team unity by mediating efficiently and effectively. Experienced leaders may be able to invert dissonance from obstacle to opportunity. Well mitigated differences can actually strengthen team cohesion. Whether teams are comprised of individuals from all corners of the city, or selected from various countries, they will usually be globally representative with members of various racial heritages. Religious convictions, or inclination to spirituality, will vary. There will be males and females, younger and older. In short, there will be group diversity.

The subsequent challenges for leaders and coaches have become well recognized. A recent survey in the United States indicates that the most important thing managers can do to further a better work environment is, to treat people fairly and justly based on actual performance and individual merit, irrespective of the employee's race, religion, age, gender, or sexual orientation (The Level Playing Field Institute, 2008). Unfortunately, discriminatory practices based on age, generational differences, culture, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity are very much prevalent in our society (Cavico, Muffler, and Mujtaba, 2012). Managers must appreciate that many employees are often sensitive about these differences. An unwary coach might easily become the victim of a discrimination accusation. Worse, the allegation could be true when managers unwittingly adopt different styles to deal with different staff members. Aside from those pitfalls, sensitivity to a group's individual components helps create a productive and positive team.

Age Demographic

Managers have always had to lead team members of different age groups. Good leaders find common ground between the generations and create positive relationships. Traditionally, a common scenario might entail an older or middle aged manager coaching a newly hired youth. This notion seems to be in keeping with conventional social norms. Youth seek advice from their elders who have a wealth of experience at their disposal. Recently though, the conventional hierarchy in the workplace is changing. It is becoming much more common for the youth to be the leader; in a position to guide much older employees. It is important to examine how far this shift has come and where it will likely go.

Demographic Shift: For simplicity, populations might be broken into three groups: young, middle aged, and old. Webster's English Dictionary defines middle age as the period between youth and old age, usually from 45 to 64 years" (Webster's English Dictionary, 2003). Accordingly, youth are the people younger than 45, while old age begins around 64. A major phenomenon in societies today is that the number of people over age 45 is increasing drastically. In 2009 the US Department of Labor sponsored a paper that claims the number of people over age 45 will go from 17 percent in 2010 to 27 percent in 2050 (Economic Systems Inc., 2009). Across Asia the number of people over age 65 is predicted to soar 314 percent between 2000 and 2050 with the average age climbing from 26 to 40 (Jaijagcome, 2011, p. 83). Worldwide the number of people over age 60 is expected to comprise 22 percent of the total population by 2050 (United Nations, 2010, p. XXV). The social and economic ramifications of this major demographic shift are of grave concern to organizations and businesses around the globe. With more aging workers reaching retirement age, there is a looming shortage of young workers. Managers and coaches must concentrate on ways to attract and retain this older workforce as a means to supplement deficiencies in the number of available young workers. Leaders have to utilize the potential of older employees, while providing them with an environment that is comfortable and sustaining. Companies need to understand the advantages of having older workers as well as the characteristics and needs of the age group.

Advantages: Different generations have different values and motivations (Barbutto and Miller, 2011). Understanding what drives a person will give leaders a big insight in how to best apply their skills and abilities. The work and life experience of elder staff can give coaches an edge when it comes to productivity. Older employees can "help reduce the impact of labor and skills shortage, be valuable in mentoring and training roles, and assist with safety, health and management" (Government of Western Australia Department of Commerce, 2010, p. 2). In large work environments, managers are often too busy to effectively coach all of their employees. By delegating coaching and other tasks to experienced older workers managers are effectively using their assets. They are also showing appreciation to deserving team members which is good for the morale of the entire team. While it is essential not to show favoritism, it is equally necessary to show no discrimination. Many companies offer health benefits to their employees. As these people age, generally the cost of their insurance rises. Some managers assume that older employees are a drain on companies' health care resources. In fact the inverse is often true (Mujtaba and Cavico, 2010). While the cost for the individual rises, the cost for dependents goes down.

Older workers have only one dependent, a spouse, or quite often, no dependents at all. Younger workers tend to have young families and consume substantially more of the health care capital.

Characteristics: Older workers in the workplace are a reality that managers must acknowledge and, at a minimum, learn to cope with. Either from economic necessity or desire to remain active, more and more older workers are electing to keep working.

While many companies have seen the benefits older workers bring to the workplace, there are some characteristics and challenges that are useful to note. Discrimination toward older people in the workplace is very common (James, Swanberg, and McKechnie, 2007). This is one reason older people tend to be more sensitive about age discrimination. They want to be treated equally and have access to the same opportunities as younger workers. They also want respect. While their bodies are physically slowing down, their minds are usually as sharp as ever. Leaders should not confuse an older person's possible inaptitude for technology with a lack of wit. Nor is fair to expect older generations to be as liberal minded as younger staff. Older people tend to be more conservative, but that must not exclude them from being welcomed into the group. A good leader has to facilitate a sense of wellbeing for all employees. Older employees may require a little more effort and understanding.

Overall, older employees are a valuable asset to a workplace. They often bring a bounty of skills and experience. As with any staff member, managers should take the time to get to know them and understand how to best incorporate them into the team. Be sensitive to their needs and aware of their potential shortcomings. Most importantly, treat older workers fairly. Use their abilities, earn their respect, and be appreciative of their contributions.

Religion Demographics

Freedom of religion is a fundamental principle for anyone in any workplace and in any country. Exercising that freedom in everyday life may not be a problem unless it interferes with a person's work duties and schedules. Religious activities in a workplace that could cause a conflict must be prevented by management. In the United States (US), managers have to understand the definition of religion under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Federal and state laws protecting the rights of employees must be carefully considered by the management. Managers need to be aware of these laws in order to effectively and legally manage their employees. Managers must treat all employees equally and sensitively regardless of whether they are traditionally religious, or appear to be only nominally religious. They should let the employees know that conflict due to demographic differences is not productive and not acceptable. Employees must understand the importance of being respectful and tolerant of everyone's differences and beliefs. Company policies are essential tools to prevent such conflict and to create a productive or pleasant workplace environment. Organizations with an effective program to balance employees' productivity and family life will be able to retain good employees.

Company policies should be carefully worded to avoid making religious belief an implicit requirement for being part of the company. Managers need to be trained to avoid committing unlawful harassment when discussing personal religious beliefs with employees. A policy and procedure for all employees must include training to avoid the harassment as well. The policy must cover protected religious category. It should include a prohibition of harassment and complaint procedure. The organization must investigate and take action appropriately after receiving a complaint to prevent and avoid further damage to reputation of the organization. Demographics of the work forces in organizations throughout the world have changed and become more diverse. Many organizations hire talented employees with different religions and beliefs. Religious diversity is not different from any other form of diversity in an organization (Ranger, 2001). Managers have to understand that many employees consider their religion an integral part of who they are, and leaders must make it clear that it is perfectly acceptable to retain their beliefs as part of who they are. As working hours get longer and more stressful, more employees want their faith right in the workplace as well as at home (Ranger, 2001). Sometimes, employees' religious obligations can conflict with their ability to perform their normal work duties. Managers need a guideline on religious practices and how to make decisions that are fair to all employees in the workplace.

According to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), religious discrimination involves treating an employee unfavorably because of his/her religious beliefs (U.S. Equal Employment, 2011). The law protects not only people who belong to traditional, organized religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, but also others who have sincerely held religious, ethical or moral beliefs.

Thus, it is illegal to harass a person because of his/her religion or belief. The law requires an employer to accommodate an employee's religious beliefs or practices, unless doing so would cause more than a minimal burden on the operations of the employer's business (Ranger, 2001). This means an employer may be required to make reasonable adjustments to the work environment that will allow an employee to practice his/her religion. Examples of some common religious accommodations include flexible scheduling, voluntary shift substitutions or swaps, job reassignments, and modifications to workplace policies or practices.

Tolerance, acceptance and appreciation of religious diversity happen in any organization. Balancing the needs of the organization and the employees with different religious beliefs requires effective communication and commitment. However, once it is recognized, accepted and understood by all parties involved, it will help the organization achieve their mission more efficiently. It also will increase employee goodwill and retention. Therefore, it will improve the company's productivity.

Demographic Shift: The EEOC's guidelines on religious accommodation states that employees can ask for time off to participate in religious worship (U.S. Equal Employment, 2011). Employees must make the first move to work toward an accommodation. Employees can inform the employer if they need a religious accommodation. The law says employers must "reasonably accommodate" employees' "sincerely held" religious practices unless doing so would impose an "undue hardship" on the employer. In most cases, such accommodations involve giving employees time off to attend religious service. In addition, employers can't treat followers of one religion differently than other employees. They must allow employees to engage in religious expression, unless doing so would impose an undue hardship on the organization. Managers must prevent religious harassment of their workers.

Religious discrimination claims have increased at a higher rate than many other kinds of discrimination claims over the last decade or so. Data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) showed that the number of religion-based charges brought by U.S. employees grow steadily over two decades ago (Pearce, 1994). The events of 9/11 have increased religious discrimination cases in the United States. In Fiscal Year 2010, EEOC received 3,790 charges of religious discrimination. EEOC resolved 3,782 religious discrimination charges and recovered \$10.0 million in monetary benefits for charging parties and other aggrieved individuals (not including monetary benefits obtained through litigation) (U.S. Equal Employment, 2011).

Many organizations create a discrimination policy. This policy should outline disciplinary action that will be taken when employees allow demographic differences to get in the way of their job performance. For example, a company can hold a training session to explain the discrimination policy in detail. Be sure all employees understand that demographic conflicts will affect how their job performance is viewed and will lead to disciplinary action. Make it clear during training that workers must come forward when they feel discriminated against and that action will be taken immediately and seriously. Organizations can also arrange a special committee that represents the company's diversity. This committee should make suggestions for policy changes and offer feedback about how to handle demographic conflict in the workplace. Take the suggestions seriously and incorporate them into the discrimination policy.

Advantages: Managers must emphasize the importance and the benefits of having a diversified workplace. When an organization does not close the door to any particular group of people, they will benefit from range of ideas, creativity and innovation that come from a diverse group. A *Wall Street Journal* article (April 19, 2005) describes how PepsiCo benefits from diversity in its workforce by retaining diverse workers and turning their varied ideas into a competitive advantage over rivals, particularly in product innovation and marketing. In 2003, around \$250 million of Pepsi's revenue growth was supposedly from new products inspired by diversity efforts. PepsiCo's Chairman/CEO Steve Reinemund says, companies that understand the diversity challenge will have a competitive advantage (Thompson, 2005). Bigotry is not only a sign of weakness, it also weakens the company. When an organization limits the kinds of people they are willing to hire, they limit the available talent pool they draw from. Discrimination limits the productivity of the organization and prospects for growth and survival (Thompson, 2005).

American Express and religious groups: Companies that value diversity often have networks to educate and support their employees. For example: American Express has a total of 14 employee networks, including three religious ones.

It has three distinct networks: SALT, Christian network; CHAI, Jewish network; and PEACE, Muslim network. Like all of the employees' networks, membership and event attendance are open to every employee of any faith. The networks are also led by employees and have senior-level sponsors (Peraino, 2010).

SALT: Its Christian principles have been successfully mapped to the values of American Express—excellence, integrity, honesty and personal commitment to enhance the workplace for all. These principles translate in everything SALT does; each value statement and its importance are supported with scripture. Like other religious networks, SALT supports recruiting efforts, helps educate and train employees about religious diversity and creates employee engagement through events and communication.

SALT, the Christian Employee Network, serves as a resource to the Christian-employee community and makes a positive impact in the workplace.

CHAI: the Hebrew word for “life,” is the Jewish Employee Network that strives to increase awareness of Jewish culture and traditions, serves as a resource and enhances networking and diversity in the workplace. The network hosts annual events such as a Purim/Passover happy hour, a Shavuot holiday-information lunch, a Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur event, and a Hanukkah holiday event, as well as numerous educational sessions. “We educate the American Express employee population on religious issues that help make them culturally sensitive in their jobs,” says a member of CHAI.

PEACE: a Muslim Employee Network fosters an environment of understanding and education and informs American Express employees about Islamic faith and Muslim traditions. It hosts lunch-and-learn educational events and participates in community events. This network provides an outlet at work that is not specifically about and individual's job. It fosters a sense of community and helps to give others a greater understanding of who they are and what they are about.

Each of these faith-based networks from American Express calls out a primary purpose: to foster an environment of understanding that counters stereotypes. For this reason, it's not unusual for their networks to collaborate. Members of CHAI invite SALT members to a lunch-and-learn to gain a better understanding of Jewish high holidays, for instance. SALT helps PRIDE, American Express's LGBT network, prepare materials for a member drive. PEACE members secure prayer rooms for use by employees of any faith. Although religious networks may seem complicated, at American Express, they have provided a very productive outlet for employees to fully engage at work, to learn more about themselves and each other, and to build bridges to understanding. Accommodating religion in the workplace and supporting employees to exercise their freedom of religion has helped American Express enhance diversity and inclusiveness and retain talent. Moreover, religious expression brings broader experiences and perspectives that strengthen the relationships with and the services they provide for their customers.

Management must use effective organizational tools to support religious diversity in the global workplace. Managers have to develop authentic, emotional and intelligent leadership styles to manage employees with different cultures and beliefs. When managing different people from different religions, managers must have an open mind, respect their similarities and differences. It is important that managers treat everyone with the same degree of respect and should not judge persons on their differences. Religious diversity is no different from any other form of diversity. Once it is understood and accepted, it will help the organization to achieve its goals. Balancing business needs and the needs and aspirations of different religious groups requires commitment to education, compromise and tolerance. And at the end, it will create a happy and more fulfilled workplace, and increase profitability for the organization.

Race Demographic

With the development of globalization, more and more multinational corporations are founded in different countries, such as Dell Computer, Toyota Motor, and MOTOROLA Inc. The leaders of these multinational corporations will have many opportunities to lead team members who come from different countries. Leadership is about building a rapport with people from different backgrounds, whether they are engineers, salespeople, introvert, extrovert, Indian, Japanese or French (Mottet, 2010). Some theories of leadership talk about “situational leadership” to highlight the need for managers to adapt to different situations and different people to get things done. Ultimately, it is about building rapport, communicating and motivating people based on their background.

Building rapport is typically more difficult if the person is from a different country. For instance, Americans are typically very friendly, outgoing and loud. On the contrary, Indians are typically quieter and more reserved. The leader should know how to adapt to the different culture and identify how they can build rapport. They should reflect on the other person's behavior. Motivating people from different backgrounds can also prove to be challenging. Some cultures value team spirit and community, while other cultures value individualism and personal rewards. Leaders should be mindful of direct employees' preferences when it comes to giving credit and handing out rewards. Imagine a manager from China that has to lead a team made up of Japanese, Chinese, and Americans. It will be necessary to understand team members' culture, religion, and attitude, and to establish comprehensive coaching and performance management systems to increase their effectiveness within the company.

Cross cultural communication can create many complications and opportunities for a business. There are some basic tips that can help the leaders minimize misunderstandings and to maximize their cross-cultural communications.

Firstly, American culture tends to be highly individualistic. This kind of employee places more emphasis on their individual actions, accomplishments and goals (Ivancevich, 2010). Additionally, Americans also tend to practice low power distance. They do not like strictly obeying the manager's decisions and the American managers also think that they are equal to other colleagues without any other specific power. There is low avoidance of uncertainty in the American culture; they think risk is their destiny and that they should have courage to take risks in the life or work. Short-term orientation in American cultures is very popular (Ivancevich, 2010). American businessmen usually only emphasize how much money or profit they will get from the project or business. They often are perceived to not care about the relationship with business partners. Additionally, for their employees, they think that the relationship between them is only a "contract." American culture represents more masculinity. Americans like competition with others, such as with colleagues, classmates, and even friends. In this cultural background, Americans are typically very friendly, outgoing and loud. Therefore, facing this kind of employees the leaders should be open to push behaviors (Mujtaba, 2008, pp. 56-57) Leaders should coach to get their decisions or ideas heard, however; it is also important to allow some autonomy in the workplace.

Secondly, Japanese and Chinese team members. Chinese and Japanese cultures are very similar in some respects, soleaders may see the same kinds of behavior with both groups. Both Chinese and Japanese cultures tend to be highly collective (Ivancevich, 2010). With regard to social goals, personal goals, and national benefits for example, both cultures emphasize group achievement and well-being. China and Japan are high power distance countries so every body must obey government regulations and company rules. Japanese and Chinese employees strictly obey the leaders' decisions and company regulations. Both groups think that obeying managers is their destiny. When they make a sacrifice for company benefits, they will think that this activity is honorable. People from China and Japan are high on avoidance of uncertainty dimension of culture. They attempt to predict, control, and influence future events; therefore, they don't like taking risk in business or change jobs frequently. Chinese and Japanese businessmen tend to build a long-term relationship with their partners and staff. Therefore, leaders should use pull behavior in the coaching process (Mujtaba, 2008, p. 57). This method requires summarizing, clarifying and actively listening by asking questions, to draw the other into the discussion, topic and interaction. Leaders can directly show them how to complete work or directly tell them tell them standards that must be met. Japanese and Chinese will strictly follow the requirements to finish the job.

Cross-cultural adaptability is crucial in gaining a competitive advantage in the global market (Elmuti, Dean, Tuck, Benjamine, Kemper, & Friederike 2008). The globalization of business has made it necessary for managers, as well as other employees, to become more adaptable and culturally savvy. Organizations that hire based on these characteristics, or help their employees to develop international skills while working for the organization, have a significant competitive advantage. A firm's global success relies on its ability to enter new markets quickly and effectively. To accomplish the transition, companies rely heavily on the abilities of employees. Therefore, companies are realizing that hiring or training managers to be able to function in more than one nation or culture is necessary. Effective managers and coaches must be sensitive to the needs of all their employees. They must work strategically to make sure that each person, from any culture, is as successful as they would like to be based upon each employee's qualifications, goals, abilities, and competencies. Sensitivity, through effective coaching can certainly enhance employee commitment.

Gender Demographics

A thorough perspective challenges both the homogenizing and differentiating notions of gender. In this section, we explore the particular intersection of gender and leadership. Therefore we need to analyze the confluence of gender and leadership to discover what causes conflicts between males and females in the workplace. Also it is important to attempt the development of feasible solutions by giving guidelines and suggestions. Leaders must respect gender diversity and endeavor to assign each person to tasks that best suit his/her strengths. This will optimize employee satisfaction as well as productivity.

According to historical social roles, females were expected to stay at home and stand behind their man. This pattern was well known and prevalent the world over. Along with social progress, a major social shift was taking place in the workplace; more and more women were going to work.

There is now a widespread agreement that both males and females should have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of society such as voting, education, and work. Initially, in a male-dominated society, the large majority of female workers regarded their unequal standing in the workplace as unfair. Now however, as the majority of people are working in gender-mixed workplaces, they necessarily have to build partnerships and work in coordination. But when we observe the percentage of females in high position, it remains low (Catalyst, 2011). How can females break this glass ceiling in the workplace in order to achieve their full potential? Too often people emphasize employee equality, especially gender equality, when in fact it still remains a broad concept. The metaphor of the "glass ceiling" has been used to describe an invisible, artificial barrier which prevents well-qualified individuals from ascending to higher positions. Too often, even today, those barriers still exist.

Jack Welch, a former of General Electric (GE) group, discovered a treasure; the best minds and talent resource in Japan came from women. He also found that Japanese females are not as easy to get into business as males, and that very few females get promoted to high level positions. He used the opportunity to differentiate themselves from other competitors in Japan by spending a million dollars to advertise "preferred female posts" in the company. That proved to be a huge success for GE. Another brainchild of GE was GEWN, General Electric Women's Network which helps women balance their families and career, resolve conflicts of gender discrimination in the workplace, and to become business women. GEWN tries to facilitate work relationships with opposite sexes, either superior or subordinate, and to overcome the often invisible glass ceiling. Up to now, GE is still benefiting from an abundance of human resources in Japan as well as around the globe.

When leading a company or a team of employees, a person has to be prepared to deal with the consequences and take responsibility. In this position, no matter if you are male or female, you have to try your best to build out a platform of activity rather than just do one thing and do it very well. Many qualified female leaders today are moms and wives at home, but when they get in the workplace, they excel at interpersonal communication, flexibility, caring, thoughtfulness, and most interpersonal skills. These females are good at negotiations, like to cooperate, and are rational and perceptual. They do not just communicate to employees in a one-way format, but undertake to educate, guide, persuade, and influence in order to achieve the goals of management.

Sometimes females find it easier to implement a business strategy than their male counterparts. This can be especially true in coordinating negotiations involving multiple parties who will benefit from the cooperation. Quite often males look for a quick win in negotiations, even if the other party does not. Women tend to be more patient and seek out win-win outcomes through a two-way dialogue, so they can more easily build up partnerships with others. On the other hand, males are likely to be more decisive, when something requires making a quick decision. Some people consider males to be more suited to deal with finance, venture investment, engineering, technologies, and marketing as these fields often require high levels of independence and assertiveness.

A leader cannot stand on the sidelines in the workplace, but has to be involved with the employees. Leaders should attract new employees with good skills, and be able to develop and retain talented people. The leader should come to know the employees and their skills in order to effectively coach them and to assign them appropriate tasks. Good leaders inspire people to be their best whether they are male or female. They know that there is no place in modern and successful workplaces for any type of discrimination. Effective leaders, managers and coaches treat all employees fairly, equally, and with respect.

To sum up, there are some guidelines to correctly deal with gender issues. Both males and females have natural strengths and weaknesses. When men and women work together in partnership, their talents will complement each other. In business, opportunities are boundless. By utilizing the skills of both males and females, companies can increase their competitiveness, and potentially broaden their fields of excellence. Wise leaders will focus on performance without any gender bias. It doesn't matter if a person is male or female, black or white, and even regardless of their religious views or sexual orientation. Leaders have to treat everybody equally. Managers should do away with preconceptions and concentrate on maximizing employee satisfaction and performance. Positive attitudes are contagious. When a leader leads by example, others tend to follow them, and positive change becomes a workplace norm. Gender issues help to enrich and complete the notion of coaching culture that human potential is vast and multifaceted. Gender is a key value in leveraging differences to achieve unity in diversity (Rosinski, 2003).

Summary

Contemporary workplaces are usually far from homogenous in terms of human resources. Typically workplaces are melting pots of different ages, different religions, different races, and different genders, along with various other human denominations. Unprepared leaders might be intimidated by the conflicts that could arise from the confluence of diverse demographic groups. Fortunately most companies have learned that diversity should not be averted, but embraced. While it is essential for companies and managers to understand and respect all demographic groups in the workplace, such empathy can be very rewarding. In fact, for most companies today, the mixture of different perspectives and skills that are part of a diverse workplace are essential to remain competitive. Leaders who adopt a positive attitude toward all others equally, will have a much greater wealth of human resources. This translates into greater productivity, more satisfying job relationships, longer employee retention, and a stronger supply of fresh ideas. A wise person once said that there is strength in numbers. Wise leaders realize that utilizing all demographic groups effectively will increase the company's numbers, and accordingly the strength of the organization.

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