



HARLINA SODHI

Diversity and Leadership

An idea whose time has come and gone!



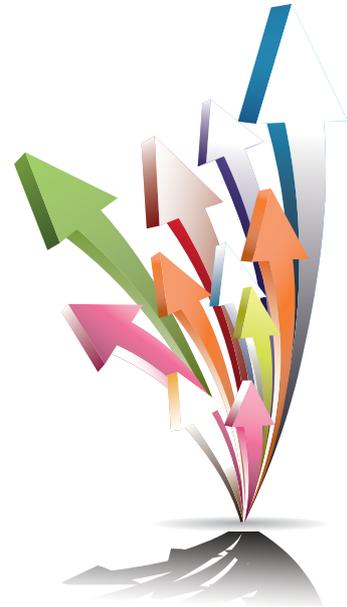
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This decade is perhaps the last port of call for the companies still thinking about Diversity and Leadership. Diversity is not just Gender and Leadership is not just CEO, CFO, COO or the person who owns the company. But alas even after there have been countless articles and blogs written to this effect, endless academia research and white paper that has been published, scores of management lectures and panel discussions on the subject, it's still the 1st thought that pops up even in the most progressive leaders' minds and companies. The question that begs to be asked is – Not "Why not?" But "Why?"

To my mind, it's because we have allowed ourselves to think like this. HR and Diversity leaders across the world have risen in unison in the last decade or so and drilled the concept of Diversity and role of leadership into every leader's mind, hard-wired it into HR core processes of hiring, learning, performance management etc., to the extent that it's now become a muscle memory of all leaders! If that be the case then why do we bemoan it?

My viewpoint is that in the corporate world, we have reduced the power and potential of Diversity to the point of trivialization and metrification. It's a contrarian viewpoint but backed by experience and tons of data.

Let's look at some other worlds to see how the concepts of Diversity and Leadership play out. If we reflect on any movie award function such as Oscars or Filmfare or



IIFA, we will remember that on stage every actor who wins an award starts by saying "I won this because of my team – my director, choreographer, screenplay writer, music director, stunt man, make-up artist, publicist and so on" - what they are really saying is – They won because diverse skills came together to create a perfect mosaic – catapulting them into realms of leadership. The producer and director of the film knows this well and spends years putting this magic potion together. Another example is of our armed forces. There is the Army, the Air Force and the Navy. There is perhaps no one better in the country than the Chiefs of the Armed Forces who know the immense power of Diversity because it is they who bring it all together in times of unrest, war, riot, revolt etc. As an example, the diverse skill set of different parts of India's armed forces show various aspects of Diversity – the strength of the Punjab regiment, fearlessness of Maratha troops, Guerrilla war-tactics of the Nagas and valour of Gorkha regiment amongst many others are legendary. Knowing that the only way to win is by leveraging diversity, keeps the country safe. In fact, it's elementary and the core strength in the minds of the leaders of the entertainment industry and defence forces. Hence, it's the proverbial writing on the wall in the corporate world that says, indeed shouts that leaders need to appreciate diversity, manage diversity and learn to leverage diversity to ensure competitive

strength in the market place as well demonstrate their core moral value system of “opportunity for all”, “fair play” and “equal playing field”. If we continue to hire just men over women believing there are no women out there in the job market who meet our role needs, if managers continue to hire clones of themselves, if leaders vociferously keep defending that “all is well” in their organizations, we have lost the plot even before it has begun. I find it fairly a waste of time to keep convincing leaders of the merits of diversity, as it’s perhaps the most unproductive job anyone could do in today’s age and times!

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So based on my own experience of leading the Diversity agenda in large corporations for over 15 years, my call to action points are as under :

1. Weave Diversity and Inclusion into the language of the company. Sprinkle all leadership communication with the words which position Diversity in the right spirit – Get the verbiage right.

2. Articulate, document and publish your Diversity agenda and then measure it. Drive it relentlessly, with conviction and passion. The slightest doubt or hesitation will kill it.
3. Continuously check how your diverse population feels – conduct pulse surveys, do focus groups, set up coffee chats – what you don’t know, you can’t solve for!
4. Set up employee resource groups –there is power in togetherness. Groups such as Newbies to the company, First time mothers, Far from homeland and such derive comfort and feeling of oneness. Do not fear them getting together - Let them learn from each other.
5. Run unique programs so that the leaders truly understand the nuances of Diversity, such as have a diverse employee from across the company in a structured manner and rotation, attend boardroom meetings, sit through critical project discussions, travel for important client meetings, attend key marketing presentations –the insights and perspectives are bound to add value to both the parties.

