

THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY: A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

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Companies spend money, time, and energy on workplace diversity initiatives. To achieve workforce diversity, a company may hire consultants, attend seminars, and participate in roundtable discussions—but why? Is workplace diversity truly a valuable asset, and if so, how?

The answer to these questions may lie in the definition of the term “diversity” itself. According to Merriam-Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary, “diversity” has two meanings:

1. The quality or state of having many different forms, types, ideas, etc.; and
2. The state of having people who are different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization.¹

These definitions are not mutually exclusive. Combining the two sheds light on workplace diversity’s inherent value:

The quality or state of having many different forms, types, ideas, etc... *resulting from* the state of having people who are different races, genders or who have different cultures in a group or organization.

How does the state of having people of different races, genders and cultures add value? The answer is through the introduction of fresh perspectives and ideas.² Diversity’s value is perhaps best described by an expression of Anais Nin, a memoirist born to Cuban parents in France. In her 1961 “Seduction of the Minotaur,” Ms. Nin powerfully stated:

We don’t see things as they are;
we see them as we are.

What a profound statement. It describes our human limitations, as we typically only see the world through

our own life’s experiences. Ms. Nin illustrates this by describing two characters’ separate perceptions of a walk together along the Seine River:

Lillian was bewildered by the enormous discrepancy which existed between Jay’s models and what he painted. Together they would walk along the same Seine River, she would see it silky grey, sinuous and glittering, he would draw it opaque with fermented mud, and a shoal of wine bottle corks and weeds caught in the stagnant edges³.

Ms. Nin describes how the two characters share the same walk while perceiving the river in drastically different ways. Each individual filters and interprets information through his or her life’s experiences. For Ms. Nin’s characters, perhaps their gender, race or socioeconomic difference influenced their perceptions—one can only speculate. Clearly though, their perceptions were different, while the experience was the same.

Although this scene is a fictional creation, it translates to our contemporary world. While this scene is fictional, consider the following perceptual differences among various demographic characteristics:

- Agree that police officers tend to unfairly target minorities⁴:
71% of blacks;
30.4% of whites;
49.7% of people ages 18-34; and
29% of people ages 50 and older.
- Athletes or sports teams not standing during the national anthem in order to protest police violence against the black community in the United States⁵:
30% of whites approve;
74% of blacks approve;
36% of Hispanics approve;
- Concerned that the U.S. is falling behind other countries⁶:
64% of Republicans are very concerned;
26% of Democrats are very concerned;
36% of people 18-34 years of age are very concerned; and
54% of people 65 and older are very concerned.
- Support for the death penalty⁷:
44% of blacks support
69.9% of whites support
49% of non-heterosexuals support
66.5% of heterosexuals support.

This data documents differences in opinions on the same issues across different categories or groups of people. These different opinions demonstrate different perspectives which come through different life experiences. With different perspectives come new ideas and fresh innovation. Ergo, the intrinsic value of diversity.

We are all familiar with the phrase, “think outside of the box.” Well, maybe sometimes the box we try to think outside of is really a circle, and we need a fresh perspective to appreciate an organization’s own limitless boundaries.

¹ Merriam-Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary, available at <http://www.learnersdictionary.com/>.

² *We Don’t See Things As they Are, We See Them As We Are*, QUOTE INVESTIGATOR.COM, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/03/09/as-we-are/> (last visited Nov. 2, 2016).

³ Anais Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur*, 124, (6th ed. 1972).

⁴ Reuters Polling Explorer, https://polling.reuters.com/#poll/TM414Y14_3 (last visited Jan. 23, 2017).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Quinnipiac University, https://www.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us09162016_Ump93xd.pdf (last visited Jan. 23, 2017).

⁷ Reuters Polling Explorer, <https://polling.reuters.com/#poll/TM628Y15> (last visited Jan. 23, 2017).