Overcoming Barriers to Participation in Diverse Strategic Decision-Making Groups: A Leadership Perspective

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Abstract

The authors acknowledge that diversity in institutions continues to be an urgent social, cultural, and national need, and that much is yet to be accomplished before that cause is satisfied. Where diversity has already happened in decision-making and problem-solving groups, there are consequences that require special handling. The paradoxical effect of bringing diversity to otherwise homogeneous groups is that differences, as important as they are, lead to communications difficulties that may actually reduce the likelihood of the advantage of the diverse membership. The paper discusses the challenges of diversity in group settings and proposes a leadership approach to enhancing the strategic advantages that are the purpose of the diverse membership.

Keywords: Teams, Diversity, Leadership, Participation, Effectiveness

1. Introduction

Decision-making/problem-solving groups are often formed with intentionally diverse memberships to improve the likelihood that various organizational units or stakeholders are represented in the decision-making or problem-solving process and outcomes. This approach is commonly used in many types organizations, including bank boards and their audit committees, pharmaceutical companies' research review committees; corporate product development and project teams, consulting teams, university committees and classroom settings, as well as emergency response teams. The expected value of any individual committee member to the final outcome of that endeavor is most likely based on an attribute such as a special skill, knowledge base, or professional viewpoint. Thereby the viewpoints, thought processes, intuition, and judgment style of the various members, who may be engineers, marketing people, accountants (and represent diverse organizational perspectives) are expected to contribute to the quality of both the process and the product of the decision-making. They may also be chosen to represent the interests of important business units, regions, or demographic segments.

It is reasonable to assume that members are usually selected rationally because their contributions are expected to provide the desired balance to the group's outcomes. Yet, a paradox exists that challenges the likelihood that the balanced outcomes will come to fruition. A paradox, as we use the term, means an event or activity where two necessary and opposing conditions exist at the same time. Both are required and are contradictory to each other. The operative paradox here is that when within-group differences increase, the ability of the group to harvest their benefit is actually diminished.

2. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this paper is to offer a general leadership approach to improve participation rates of all members, and especially by those who are more reticent to participate fully in diverse decision-making/problem-solving.

In this paper we limit our consideration to group decision-making/problem-solving settings where significant member differences exist and where broad participation is a sought after goal. We assert that leadership

interventions will advance the meeting of the participation goal without cost to the overall goals.

3. Definitions

3.1 Diversity

In this paper, diversity refers to within-group differences based on any of the many human and occupational characteristics that differentiate us in various contexts, as mentioned above, that could affect interactions in a group setting. Relative level of preparedness is one difference in group members that may have a direct relationship with participation rates.

3.2 Participation rates

Participation rates are an expression of the extent to which each group member contributes to the overall decision process. For instance, the rate may be the member's fractional amount of group talk-time (relative participation), attendance at group meetings, or importance of contributions over the period of the decision process. Being different may affect the participation rates group members whose distinguishing characteristic disadvantage the from other group members.

3.3 Leadership

While leadership is a term widely discussed in many disciplines, with many concerns and definitions, its use in this paper serves as a proxy for a relatively few simple and definable functions. Those functions include group member selection, careful convening of meetings, careful listening, maintaining practices, group focusing, encouraging and sustaining creative but orderly discourse, assuring accurate record keeping of the ongoing discussions, and finding balance between the desire for efficiency (short meetings) and the need for effectiveness (meetings that continue toward solutions in spite of seemingly slow progress toward targeted goals).

4. Background and Significance

In June 2009, James Surowiecki, the author of The Wisdom of Crowds, wrote in his column "The Financial Page" in the New Yorker, of the failure of bank boards of trustees to stop "banks disastrous behavior" (Surowiecki, 2009, p. 26). He cited decades of attention to improving corporate boards by adding outside and independent members and making them more diverse with respect to age, gender, and background. He went on to say, however, that there is little evidence that these changes have made a difference in improving bank performance (Surowiecki, 2009). This observation challenges the notion put forth in his book, The Wisdom of Crowds, wherein he cites historical evidence that large groups of assorted people regularly make better decisions that small groups of expert specialists. One is left with the question of the validity of his premise as it relates to bank boards, whether bank boards actually have become diverse (or diverse enough), or whether some intervening variable concerning the diverse boards affects their decision-making process. The issue of relating board diversity to board performance is further raised by Scott Page in his fascinating book Differences (Page, 2006). He persuasively argues that "diversity always trumps expertise" (p.10), which would seem to suggest that bank boards which are more diverse than others would make better decisions than the less diverse ones. Taken together, the two positions suggest that on any given technical or general question, a large group of average non-expert people will make better decisions than a small group of people who are experts in the area of concern, make a strong argument for direct democracy. The implication, taken to its extreme, is that when it comes to stopping a major melt-down in financial markets or a massive oil well leak in the Gulf of Mexico, any large group of interested non-expert adults are capable of making better (both technically correct, wiser, or more responsive) decisions than small groups of financial experts at solving financial problems or petroleum engineers fixing broken well heads or for that matter, senior politicians making any decisions. As of this writing that question goes unanswered, as well as the questions of if and when diversity improves group performance and are left for continuing thought and analysis by others. Suffice it here to say that unless the diverse voices are actually heard and given appropriate considerations, those questions remain simply academic and the link between diverse members and group outcomes in actual decision-making/problem-solving settings will remain moot.

5. Review of Existing Literature

The literature of the small group diversity field has expanded greatly from where it was forty-some years ago. Then the works linking diversity and group participation were primarily published by social psychologists interested in within-group similarities and differences that were functionally related to cohesiveness and communications processes in small groups. Some of the earliest works were those by Blau (1977) and others reported by Cartwright and Zander (1968), and frequently were based on observations of small work-groups or sorority houses where members who were alike in many ways were more cohesive than those where members were different on the same dimensions. Intuitively, the logic of the findings made sense, but their relevance was

yet to become clear.

The concept of diversity in the workplace or in decision-making groups had not yet become a matter of importance in America. The goal for equality of racial minorities and women in the workplace was moving toward the "separate-but-equal" phase, but the actuality of their parity in important decision-making groups was still at the "separate-but-unequal" stage. The topic got very little traction because equal-rights law and public policy was still at a very early stage of growth, and the movement for participative justice in decision-making was at its beginnings in the European labor movement, but not America. The consciousness of organizational researchers had not yet risen to the level necessary to generate or support research in the area.

Interestingly, the concern for diversity and participation in decision-making groups was introduced by President Richard Nixon in his Administration's New Federalism Program beginning in FY 1972 moving decision-making for funding local manpower planning programs from Washington, D.C. to the regional, state, and local levels. Nixon raised the diversity issue by requiring the decision-making boards to consist of equal parts clients (welfare mothers and job trainees), local program directors, and local public leaders (business and labor republicans) thereby creating the first officially mandated diversity based decision-making system (Nixon, 1971). Prior to 1972, little or no research had been published relating diversity to participation in decision-making. When this program was announced, it seemed that the welfare clients would be somewhat disadvantaged in the group decision-making process to the more experienced and educated program directors and public members who represented two-thirds of the group members, which would portend lower participation rates by the client members.

Since then, interest in group diversity and participation has grown considerably. Many papers on this topic have already been published in scholarly journals during the most recent past as well as the long-term past going back into the 1950s. McGrath and Altman (1966) had attempted a meta-analytical synthesis by categorizing the variables from over 250 research episodes and describing their interrelationships and their mixed results. Other authors attempted similar but less ambitious research summaries, providing listings of propositions extracted from the literature. These include Thompson (1967), Collins and Guetzkow (1964), and Price (1968). At that time there was little research evidence supporting the proposition that the "level of preparedness" of an individual has impact on one's ability or willingness to participate actively in group decision-making/problem-solving processes. There was inferential support, throughout these and other individual theory and research articles, for the idea that expert-power is of immense importance in group interaction and decision-making tasks (Scott et al, 1967). Inferential support also existed for the general theory that education and experience are related directly to expert-power, influence, participation, and effective group decision making (Torrence, 1948). Furthermore, empirical evidence indicated that group member homogeneity enhanced interaction and effective decision-making. These works seemed to add credibility to the proposition that great disparity in the level of preparedness within groups would increase the committee's difficulty in achieving a goal of high general participation.

Most recently, a study published in the Academy of Management Journal reported on the effect of diversity on teams and ultimately of their performance. In their paper, the authors cited increasing "reliance on teams to generate solutions for sustained business success…" and "…a surge in research on how teams should be composed to foster high performance" (Kearney, Gilbert, & Voelpel, 2009, p. 581).

Part of that surge of research is represented by Scott Page's (2007) article suggesting that diverse groups often out-perform homogeneous groups because of what he called "superadditivity" (Page, 2007, p. 6) of what diverse members bring to the table. Also, Surowiecki in The Wisdom of Crowds suggests that left alone, large diversified groups of non-experts will frequently make better decisions than small groups made up of experts (Surowiecki, 2006). Diverse groups are increasingly important and corporations now spend billions of dollars in training and recruiting high talent and diverse members (Page, 2007).

How should intra-group diversity be defined by demographics, personality, abilities, or years on the job? Although numerous ways exist to define and measure diversity, none of them is flawless (Biemann & Kearney, 2009; Molleman, 2005), especially when it comes to evaluating group outcomes. How do various aspects of diversity affect group performance in different areas? Kostopoulos and Bozionelos (2011) believe that psychological safety reduces intra-group conflict and is positively correlated with team's capacity for exploratory learning, which leads to groups' maximized performance. Mitchell (2011) finds that team identity plays an important role in participants' commitment, which in turn improves their collaboration. Chi, Huang, and Lin (2009) postulate that groups' levels of innovation is related to team members' tenure with the organization, and that this relationship can be moderated by HR practices. A meta-analysis study (Horowitz and Horowitz, 2007)

finds a positive relationship between task-related diversity and team performance, and weaker relationships with demographic characteristics. Bell et all (2010), in another meta-analysis of team performance relationships with diversity variables, support the idea in that organizational tenure does contribute to team efficiency, especially in new product design teams, and add that race and sex variety diversity has a small negative effect on overall team performance.

Many aspects of Diversity-Participation issue have been studied in relationship to decision-making/problem-solving teams. For instance, the role of context was the subject of a recent meta-analysis (Joshi and Roh, 2009). The authors conducted a meta-analysis looking at researches that examined the role of contextual factors including the effects of industry, occupation, and team, and how they influenced the performance outcomes of relations-oriented diversity. Part of their work involved the role of these factors at the team-level, and noted that the contextual moderators were significant in affecting outcomes.

Another view (Homan et al, 2008) in thinking about diversity and participation is that the role of "open-mindedness" will affect diverse group outcomes: this important study of heterogeneous four-person teams engaged in interactive tasks, examined how the performance of those diverse teams was influenced by their measure of member openness to experience and the extent to which teams reward structure accentuated intra-group differences. They found that openness variable positively influenced diverse teams but not teams with a strong team identity (p. 1204).

A study by Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke (2009) of diversity and participation recently considered the effects of leadership styles on diverse team outcomes in over 100 U.S. hotels to understand the roles of knowledge sharing and team efficacy as it might intervene in the relationship between "empowering leadership" (p. 1239) and team performance. Team performance was based on market outcomes. The authors state that that empowering leadership was positively related to both knowledge sharing and team efficacy, which, in turn, were both positively related to performance.

Van Der Vegt, Bunderson, and Oosterhof (2006) found participation related to expertness, or as earlier mentioned, relative level of preparedness, as it relates to the need and availability of "helping behavior" (p. 877) in diverse groups. The researchers chose to test their own multilevel theory by looking at the issue of intragroup dynamics and performance outcomes through the important consideration of levels of member expertise in task-oriented teams. Looking at these groups, in part through the eyes of Peter Blau (1977) cited earlier, at the effects of power and dependence, they observed what may at first seem counter-intuitive, that in groups with higher diversity in members' perceived expertness, the members will be more committed to and more likely to help those seen as more expert (who would seem to be in less need of help) than those perceived as less expert (who would seem to be more in need of help).

A recent study (Cannella, Park, and Lee, 2008) looked at the importance of internal and external context in diverse top management teams (TMTs). They looked at earlier research on top management teams, functional diversity, and performance outcomes, and considered the moderating variables of collocation of the TMT members and environmental uncertainty on the TMT diversity-firm performance relationship. They also considered intrapersonal functional diversity. They studied TMTs from 207 American firms in 11 industries, and the positive effects of TMT's functional diversity on firm performance were more significant where TMT members had their offices in the same locations. The effects of functional diversity were also more positive with higher levels of environmental uncertainty.

In her unpublished Ohio State University Ph.D. dissertation, M. Roberge states that "it has often been recognized that workforce heterogeneity can reduce intra-group cohesiveness, and lead to conflicts and misunderstandings which, in turn, can lower employee satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors and increase turnover. Despite such a paradox in the diversity literature, answers to research questions such as "how" and "when" diversity influences performance at work are still limited within the scientific literature in management" (Roberge, 2007, ii).

In reviewing an early University of Massachusetts Ph.D. dissertation research project (Bjorklund, 1974), it seemed that the literature of the 1950s through the 1970s proved ambiguous, some supporting and others refuting evidence of a strong relationship between preparedness and participation. The results of that study were somewhat mixed. Two general hypotheses were proposed for the original study: The first was concerned with the impact, in general, of Relative Level of Preparedness (RLP) on the individual's participation level. Its purpose was to discover whether or not participation levels by individuals would generally fluctuate in direct proportion to their Relative Level of Preparedness scores. It suggested that there would be a positive relationship between RLP and the level of an individual's participation in the decision-making process. This hypothesis was based on

the assumption that members quickly credentialize themselves on the basis of some commonly understood set of criteria that would approximate their comparative RLP scores. Further, once these members ranked themselves, they would immediately take on the role of either a junior or senior team member, which would then predict their relative talk time, either less or more, depending on their position in the rank.

The second general hypothesis was concerned in a broader sense with the nature of the group structure. It suggested that in groups with higher variances in RLP scores, participation by the low scoring members would be significantly more inhibited than in the groups exhibiting lower group variances in Relative Levels of Preparedness. Essentially, the commonalities of education, experience, and knowledge of the low RLP-variance groups were expected to create climates that were supportive of their lower skill members. Likewise, it is the pressure toward conformity that could cause discomfort in the low skill members of the high RLP variance groups.

At first look, the results of this study were disappointing. Under the light of analytical scrutiny, neither of the two general hypotheses provided any important substantiation of an easy solution to the dilemma concerning the relationship between expertise and participation in diverse membership decision-making and problem-solving groups by the lowest ranking members. There was a lack of significance of any findings, either for or against the theories.

However, when the group's data was organized by a measure of the leadership styles (Using the Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) rubric of the leadership continuum which looks at a range of functions done either by leaders or followers by the official group convener/leader), an important new concept emerged. A broad interpretation of the data suggested that differences in the leadership style of the group convener/leader played an important role in the extent of participation level of the low level of preparedness members.

In groups where the convener took a laissez-faire approach, doing little and giving few directions, the group suffered from confusion and a struggle between high RLP members to create structure. In these groups, almost nothing of substance was accomplished. When the convener took a participative approach, giving directions but letting the group members decide on order and agreement on results, the groups were very effective in their tasks of deciding program values. However, in those democratically run groups, the low RLP members were basically shut out of the conversation. This was not a surprise as the most knowledgeable in group process and the current understanding of the programs had the strategic advantage. The process was efficient, but in terms of collecting the input of the client members (which was considered an important system-wide goal), it was ineffective. The autocratic convener, surprisingly, created more opportunities for input for the low RLP members. During the average two-minute time period, more and different people spoke for shorter amounts of time. The autocratic leader, who was committed to participation by all members, was best at satisfying that outcome.

6. Leadership Perspective

The group leadership approach that we propose in this paper is that despite potentially broad differences in the type, character, or intensity of the diversity between members in a group, certain specific leader behaviors will improve overall balance of participation rates of those members in decision-making groups. Robust participation in diverse groups may or may not lead to quality decisions; however, there are two issues supporting the usefulness and applicability of this approach.

First, diverse decision-making/problem-solving groups are widely used and important in many different applications and settings. Second, as the growing literature of management and social psychology suggests, there are many factors leading to significant differences between people and the decision-making/problem solving groups that impact participation rates.

Heterogeneous groups face potential efficiency disadvantages to the communication process but gain potential effectiveness advantages due to their diverse backgrounds, while homogeneous groups accrue potential efficiency advantages in ease of communications at the probable cost of effectiveness disadvantages due to the sameness of member backgrounds. We believe that the practice of focused leadership by the group's convener will improve the likelihood the diverse group will achieve the tactical advantage for which they are created.

The leadership approach being offered here states that participation rates of group members are a direct result of the quality of following variables:

1) Leadership style: the quality of the leader and her/his ability to manage group deliberations and maintain sustained member attention.

2) Team membership selection rules: how diversified is the group's membership? The leader of the group may or may not be the convener of group, and as such the leader may not control the structure of the membership.

However, the composition of the group will contribute to the challenge of the group process. We assert that the leadership approach will enhance outcomes regardless of the many possibilities within group differences.

3) Focused-listening: the continued attentiveness of the leader and group members to each other's inputs.

4) Group patience: The group's tolerance of the leader's attention to members' inputs.

As the discussions move forward, both focused-listening and group patience are dependent, in part, on the quality and type of leadership in the group, regardless of the group's composition. In other words, focused-listening is a leadership requirement which can be transformational to the focus of the group itself. Group patience and focus may prove difficult for a leader to sustain when group members become frustrated with seemingly slow, tedious meetings that at times seem relatively unproductive.

7. Discussion

At the time of this writing, little empirical evidence is found on relationships between leadership styles and work outcomes. Among those studies that attempt to examine such relationships are those by Campbell, Bommer, and Yeo (1997), Gil et all (2005), and Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam (2009). These studies imply that leadership is a significant factor in team effectiveness. According to Blake and Mouton's (Northouse, 2004) Managerial (leadership) grid, organizations achieve their goals through concern for production (completing organizational tasks) and concern for people (referring to how a leader attends to the people who are to complete these tasks). Team management style, where concerns for both goal attainment and for people are high, places strong emphasis on both tasks and interpersonal relationships by promoting a high degree of participation in the group. In our case, this goal is the arrival at an optimum decision.

For the purposes of this paper, we have defined leadership as an interactive process between the group's convener/leader and its participants where the leader focuses on influencing all of the diverse individuals in the group to achieve a common goal through demonstrating specific behaviors. This is a leader-centered perspective on the process of influence, where the leader is defined through his or her behaviors – more specifically, relationship behaviors, which are aimed at helping subordinates feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation in which they find themselves. Our theory suggests that the leadership style, exhibited through distinctive behaviors, serves as an integrative link for a diverse group's common set of shared values, norms, and assumptions. This common set of values, then, transpires through group patience and focused listening skills, thus increasing participation skills and enhancing the quality of the decision-making process. Counter-intuitively, we suggest that the leadership style conducive of developing such outcomes is possibly more autocratic, with a focus on group process, rather than democratic (less frequent use of consensus and more dependence on directions and commands) – at least in the earlier stages of the group's formation.

Full participation comes with a price, and to put it simply and bluntly, when full participation by all group members is important, no matter what the member's particular brand of diversity, the leader, group, and organization must be prepared to pay the price in time and energy to accomplish it. The willingness of the leader, group members, and the host organization to pay that price is based on the expected value of the additional input of all members and the capability of the leader to discern which members possess undeveloped relevant knowledge and to encourage the member to reveal that knowledge when it can enhance the outcomes of the group.

The leadership approach intervention may sound like a reductionist version of the Vroom-Jago Leader-Participation Model of decision-making choices (Vroom & Jago, 1988) where the choices for the leader are (1) Decide alone, (2) Consult members individually, (3) Consult the group, (4) Facilitate, and (5) Delegate. We are in full agreement with this model to the point where a decision has been turned over to a group, and where the group process and the diversity of membership are sought. We simply believe this is a clarification, extension and enhancement of the third and fourth steps of that model.

We believe that this approach factors in all potential variables and variations of the problem, and that one factor that can overcome all of these challenges resulting from the diversity-participation-paradox. That factor is the patient and focused leader. The model that we propose is simple, and should provide improved outcomes in many- perhaps most-group decision-making situations.

8. Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

First, with respect to the hard work of focused listening and group patience, we believe that the brunt of it will fall on the leader. Therefore, leaders may need training committee convening and managing, particularly in focused listening skills and member participation analysis. Second, all participants deserve a leader who provides direction, nurturing, and support in order for them to be comfortable, engaged, and willing to speak up.

Third, a convener who is not part of the decision-making task, say a Human Relations person who organizes committees, plays an important role in structuring the group with people who are coached to be assertive in new situations. Fourth, we recommend one-on-one meetings with the least outspoken group members -before, after, and between group meetings as a way to encourage their participation and inputs. Fifth, especially in challenging situations, the organization, or the group itself, could retain a discussion facilitator or consultant to assure that "quiet" members do submit their inputs despite their hesitance to contribute. This behavior sends a message to the rest of the group that every participant's contribution is essential for the outcome. Sixth, leader should intentionally, consistently, and visibly model active and focused listening, discouraging interruptions and evaluations of these tentative contributions. The group members will learn that the established group norms will be upheld at all times. Where the leader has the insight to recognize an important break-through in the team's interactive decision-making process and take the courage to deviate from a prescribed meeting scenario in order to "dig deeper", to support and encourage participants who may be taking the process in an anticipated but potentially fruitful direction, the rest of the team is watching an example of "patience at work". By demonstrating and encouraging these behaviors in the group the leader enhances and encourages the opportunity to capitalize on what each participant potentially has to contribute towards both the quality and the quantity of the outcome. Finally, at some point it may become important that the leader discerns, as the saying goes, "when to hold and when to fold." To assist in this process, we recommend either special group and leader training, or a group consultant who will listen and provide direction when needed.

We believe that the need for further research lies in the value of diversity as well as the approach to improving participation. That is, what is the marginal utility of increasing units diversity compared to the marginal cost? For instance, given the potential stress of the diversity-participation-paradox, is there a point of diminishing marginal returns from the inserting increasing amounts of diversity into a decision-making/problem-solving group where the advantage, in terms of increased communications, is out-weighed by its disadvantage in decreased participation measures? Also, we believe that additional research into the leadership measures in terms of how much is too much leadership intervention where the majority group members begin to lose patience with the mechanisms to increase participation of the more minority members. Additionally, there is the question of the learning curve for the minority participants where they become fully integrated. One of the constraints is that in today's organizations, more often these groups are of a temporary nature, so the team building needs to become generalized and extend to membership in new group settings. These questions lead to the important issue of how to measure the actual strategic advantage of adding increasing amounts of diversity in a decision-making process.

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