

CHAPTER 32

DIVERSITY—ENDORSE IT OR BE LEFT BEHIND

The engineering labs and offices of the 21st century are more diverse than ever before. Our global economy, international business, desires to have the best people, and ease of migration, contribute to having a diverse workforce. Any manager or company that endorses an attitude of hiring only people who look, think, and act similar to themselves, are dinosaurs who will not survive. In this chapter, we discuss what diversity is and how it is good for your company and your career.

WHAT IS DIVERSITY? WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES?

Workplace diversity refers to the differences in people with regard to their gender, religion, race, age, personality, ethnic background, education, physical handicaps, and many more factors. Diversity is not only recognizing these differences, but also accepting them and working with others who are different from us for the common good of the team, project, and your career.

Diversity has been around for many years but it is only recently that HR departments and employers have taken to making it a top priority. If we look back over time we can see some of the most significant contributions to science have been from people who would be considered diverse. One example is Charles Steinmetz who was severely crippled and had immigrated to the United States. He was almost not let in because of his physical disabilities. Steinmetz developed the theory for our modern day power systems in the early 1920s. One early pioneer of women in science was Marie Curie, who was responsible for developing the science of radioactivity. Steven Hawking, although physically handicapped, is an internationally recognized scientist

with his theories on the Big Bang; the list goes on and on. I believe the best example of where diversity is alive and well is NASA Space Station and Shuttle program. The international participation on the space station and the diverse background of astronauts has allowed us to do things never thought possible.

An engineering team's success depends on its members' ability to accept people of different backgrounds and work together. Engineering teams that endorse diversity have advantages. These advantages include:

1. Increased versatility and better potential for solving a wider range of problems
2. More effective and efficient engineering efforts
3. Exposure to new and different ideas.

With a diverse team, members bring different experiences and methods to solving problems. This results in versatility and a wider range of solutions to choose from. Having good options is what it is all about when faced with difficult engineering problems. A diverse team offers the potential to be more effective since members can provide a wider variety of resources and solutions to the problem. With better solutions, the team is ultimately more efficient.

Diverse engineering teams where the members cannot work together will not be successful and will ultimately cost the company more money to develop products. Sondra Tiedemann in her book, *Making Diversity Work: 7 Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*, identifies that consequences of bias can include lost business, discrimination, and even lawsuits [1].

WHY ENDORSING DIVERSITY IS GOOD FOR YOUR CAREER

Accepting the differences among your teammates and learning to work with a diverse team is a critical skill you will need throughout your career. Learning to judge people on their technical ability rather than their background or physical looks is a critical skill for advancement. When you find yourself opposed to a teammate's idea or work stop, ask yourself why you are objecting. Is it because the technical idea is not good or are you biased about the idea simply because of the person presenting the idea? If the reason you are objecting is solely because of the person and not based on the technical merits of the idea, are you really being fair? Could your bias and prejudices be coming out? One quick test of your bias is to consider how your reaction to the idea might change if another person on the team would have suggested it. Imagine for a moment that a teammate who you are very comfortable with, had suggested the idea? Would the idea suddenly seem more reasonable and acceptable? If so, it is time to

rein in your bias and start acting more responsible and accepting of diversity.

Throughout your career you will be placed on teams containing diverse members. Your ability to perform on the job will directly depend on your capability to work in a diverse environment. Engineers who show they can perform in a diverse environment, are going to move up and get the more challenging assignments. Those engineers who hold on to their bias and prejudice and can't perform in a diverse environment, will be isolated from the group as a minimum, if not encouraged to find employment at other places.

► **Career Tip.** Judge people only on the technical content of their ideas and their ability to get work done successfully. Do not judge people's ideas and technical ability based on their background, race, or physical appearance.

As you move up the corporate ladder, you will be moving more into a leadership role where you will be directing diverse teams. Your ability to unite the team and bring out the best in them for the benefits of the project and ultimately for the company will depend on how well you deal with their diverse backgrounds and your ability to remove biases.

Endorsing diversity and capitalizing on the differences and strengths of people is a career accelerator. One way to encourage diversity is to celebrate diversity among your team members. When I found out that one of my team members was an immigrant from Somalia, I asked him to give a short presentation on their customs and dress. The engineer showed up to a noontime brown bag in traditional Somalia dress for men to give a presentation about his homeland. The engineer talked about his upbringing and living in a warlord society where people and parts of the country were segregated based on one's ancestry. People did not dare travel to an opposing warlord controlled city for fear of being killed. He discussed the life styles of his nomadic people and the dating rituals of the young people. He shared with us his story on how his family migrated to the United States and the problems they encountered.

The room was packed and it was one of the best-attended brown bag presentations of the year. Everyone left the room wiser and more accepting of the differences in our teammates. There are many well-written books to help guide people on diversity. To find additional information, search the Internet for "Diversity in the Workplace."

► **Career Tip.** Help facilitate a diversity event or meeting in your company. Diversity events can be great for people to share their backgrounds and life experiences with each other.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

REFERENCE

1. Tiedemann, Sondra, *Making Diversity Work: 7 Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*, Kaplan Business, 2003.