

The Art of Other-Management: Meta Five 'As' Approach of Managing Differences (Part Two)

1. **Accommodate: Ability to adjust our differences and moderate own behaviors for the greater good.**

Accepting differences is still insufficient. The third step involves accommodating the differences. When we work together, conflicts will surface. During a conflict situation, these differences are accentuated and may become a serious impediment to the growth of the organization. Accommodating differences goes beyond just acceptance. We need to moderate and adjust to differences that may exacerbate conflicts.

How do we accommodate differences? Here are a few suggestions.

a. **Focus on shared goals**

If we mobilize our team to focus on the organization's greater objectives, many are prepared to adjust their wants, sacrifice their immediate needs and manage their differences to work towards the bigger goals. I have seen it many times: people pulling together in a crisis or team members putting aside their differences to focus on a greater challenge.

b. **Emphasize our shared values**

One of Singapore Airlines' core values is safety. In my consulting work with them, I have been impressed that though people may come from different educational backgrounds, different ethnic groups, and different styles of communication, safety is never compromised.

Every single staff, from the driver at tarmac, technician in the engineering division to the cabin crew on the plane and the senior management, is thoroughly committed to it.

Core values bind the organization together and people will make adjustment to deliver these values. Communicating and strengthening these core values is the job of the leader at all levels.

c. **Major in the major**

Very often, minor issues are infused with disproportionate importance. We fight over these issues only to discover that we have expended inordinate amounts of energy and time in insisting on our way. After the fight, we realize that the issue really does not matter or that our way was not the best or only way. We need to ask ourselves, is this issue worth fighting for?

d. **Realize that habits and lifestyles are harder to change.**

This will help us become less impatient and more willing to adjust. Moderating our expectations, complementing their areas of weaknesses, and being sensitive to their concerns will help us accommodate these differences more effectively.

However, accommodation becomes very difficult, if not impossible, when moral integrity is called into question, if there is a consistent pattern of pursuing one's self-interest and a

constant dispute over core beliefs and values. It may be better for the individuals to part way amicably.

2. Affirm: The ability to recognize and compliment the worth of the individual and their contributions.

The best relationships in an organization are often characterized by positive strokes. However, giving affirmation is counter-culture in Asia. Asians are less verbal and adopt a more self-depreciating stance.

When I was much younger, my neighbor complimented me for a good deed in front of my mum, and her instinctive response was, "No, my son is not good - he is actually very naughty."

Our tendency is to focus on the person's negative traits. We attack rather than affirm, criticize rather than compliment. We need to overcome this negative impression bias within us. The tendency is to focus on what's not achieved rather than what has been accomplished.

a. Affirm sincerely

However, affirmation must be done sincerely and not with any strings attached. My friend once said, "I don't want to be affirmed by my boss. When he affirms me, it means more work!" Some leaders only compliment people when they have more work for them to do. True affirmation must be unconditional.

b. Affirm effort not just performance

Also, we need to affirm effort not just performance. One employee felt disgusted, "My CEO is only focused on my results. She chided me when I didn't get the result we wanted even though I worked so hard in the project, working till wee hours of the night trying to get it done. I was disappointed myself. But she never realized the hours I have poured in."

He added, "She didn't even say a word of thanks for my effort. Failing has already demoralized me but to add insult to injury, the chiding made me feel even worse." That is why leaders must not forget to affirm effort and not just performance.

c. Affirm by self-comparison

I was so impressed with the introduction of value-added schools and value-added students in Singapore. As most educators are aware of, your in-take determines largely your out-put. If we get a cohort of "A" students, we will more likely to achieve "A" results in major exams.

We cannot compare schools that take in high-performing students versus those with average-performing students. We have to compare apple-with-apple. It is always based on self-comparison. The competition is against oneself not just others.

That is the rationale behind value-added schools. Relative to the same cohort, schools are pitted based on their in-take. Those that perform above their own cohort are considered value-added.

This is especially critical in encouraging the average performers. My son is a case in point. He is an average student. But recently, he showed improvement in his results and received a progress award from the school. He was exhilarated. He thought he was never good enough, in comparison with the top students. But that self-improvement and self-comparison award spurred him on. Affirmation must be based on our own improvement

3. Applaud: Ability to share in the success of others and learn from our failures

To me, this is the highest form of managing differences: the ability to enter fully in the success of another and empathize with their failures. When we succeed, we rejoice together and when we fail, we learn from our mistakes.

In contrast, in many organizations today, when our peers succeed, we feel jealous. We down play their success or worse still, we sabotage their success. When our peers fail, we celebrate.

To enter fully into the joy of another's success presupposes a healthy self-esteem. It also means helping the other person succeed, supporting our staff with our network, developing people to their fullest potential, and not allowing failures to derail our commitment to people.

Another important aspect of this: sharing sorrows and learning from mistakes. Misery loves miserable company. A joy shared is double joy. A sorrow shared is half a sorrow.

Marshall Goldsmith writes, "Unfortunately many benchmarking efforts focus only on 'what they do right'... Not enough emphasis is placed on the mistakes that were made and how people learned from these mistakes."

"Learn from the negative: A failed experiment is a source of information." Daria Hazuda, scientific director for infectious disease, Merckⁱ.

Failure can be a great learning laboratory but it takes a right attitude and culture to learn from it.

The applauding community in the organization makes each failure a shared learning experience. Facts are candidly discussed, failures diagnosed and dissected, personal mistakes are acknowledged and responsibility taken. There is no cover-up but a culture that promotes learning, unlearning and relearning.

One senior management explains how this works in his organization, "We take ownership for our work and are honest with ourselves. When we fail, we confess to our leaders. We analyze it thoroughly. Learn from it. And move on. This will be the most liberating and exhilarating organization I have worked for."

When we as leaders adopt this "Meta 5 As" approach, we will be able to manage others more effectively, transform our differences and build a great organization. Then, we can celebrate our unity in diversity!

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How do we constructively recover from conflict? Read ***Meta Seven Cardinal Steps in Recovery using RECOVER Acronym (Part 3)***

How do we constructively recover from conflict? Read ***Meta Seven Cardinal Steps in Recovery using RECOVER Acronym (Part 2)***

ⁱ Geoffrey Colvin, 2006. "What it takes to be great". Fortune, Oct 30, 2006.