

The Art of Other-Management: Meta Five “As” Approach to Managing Differences (Part One)

“Lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the differences that are inevitable in any relationship.” John Gottman

“I don’t mind leading the organization. It is people that drive me crazy!” Sounds familiar? Leadership is the art of people relationship.

Relational leadership begins with an understanding that people are very different. We have different values, beliefs, personalities, interests, and cultures. We are confronted with these differences in all arenas of life. These differences, if not managed properly, can and will have disastrous effects for our organization.

Differences are natural and neutral. We should expect differences. And they are neither good nor bad. The critical issue in leadership is how we manage these differences.

Differences will not make or break an organization but how we manage them will. It is important therefore to learn how to manage these differences so that both the organization and its people can grow. I would like to introduce the Meta Five “A” approach in managing differences.

1. **Acknowledge: Ability to realize constantly that people are different.**

Some leaders are simply unaware that people are different. We assume that other folks all like us and want them to behave like we do. We simply cannot understand why other people believe, think, and act differently.

For example, some Singaporeans make the wrong assumption that just because they are Chinese and speak Mandarin, they will have no problem working in China. But the Chinese in China are very different from the Singaporean Chinese. When we expect them to be like us, we underestimate our cultural differences.

Personality differences also explain some of our leadership behaviors. For those of us who are familiar with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, I am an extrovert: someone who is energized by people and situations. I often speak before I think. On the contrary, an introvert, one who gets energy from within oneself, thinks before s/he speaks. My partner, Michael, is a case in point: he processes his thoughts and thinks before he speaks.

It frustrates me sometimes that he is incredibly quiet in a group discussion. No matter how much I encourage, he simply is not forthcoming. On the other hand, I tend to dominate the discussion and is very opinionated and verbose.

He drives me crazy and I drive him mad too. The key is to recognize that we are different and we process information differently.

The important word in this definition is the word, ‘constantly’. We have to be reminded constantly that differences are there all the time. They will not go away. This means that we will be confronted with the same differences in opinions, styles of working, and manners of communication.

Constantly recognizing that people are different is the first step towards making differences work for us. If not, we ignore these differences to our peril.

2. Accept: Ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses within ourselves and others.

The second step is to accept these differences. This is where some of us falter. We refuse to accept the other person's differences. We want them to be like us. Often, we see their differences as weaknesses.

Worse still, we try to correct them, without earning the right to do so. As the maxim goes, it is difficult to teach old dogs new tricks. Personality types, communication modes, management styles, and cultural backgrounds are all ingrained habits.

An apparent weakness may be an unrecognized strength. An introvert's internally-driven energy can be used to the organization's advantage. Rather than push them for an immediate response, we should understand how to work with them.

I find that introverts are more thoughtful, work better in small groups, come across better in one-on-one informal interactions and they operate best in a climate of trust.

Instead of criticizing them for non-involvement or accuse them of indifference, a leader should develop the ability to recognize their strengths. Unfortunately, some leaders deny the introvert's strengths and perceive their behaviors as weaknesses.

On the other hand, an over-utilized strength can become a weakness. In a landmark study of how leaders are derailed, Morgan McCall Jr., in his book, *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*, notes that the first derailment factor is when a strength becomes a weakness.

He asserts, "every strength, even those that have led to success, can be or become a weakness. For the brilliant, there are the potential downsides of dismissing others' ideas, of not listening, or of letting arrogance take root."ⁱⁱ

An extrovert's strength in communicating and sharing ideas can be a weakness, if the person keeps dominating discussions, fails in listening to feedback, and derides other people's less forthcoming styles. A leader should also be able to recognize when an over-utilized strength has become a weakness.

Therefore, acceptance involves self-understanding, self-management, appreciating weaknesses as strengths, leveraging their strengths appropriately, learning to take responsibility for actions, being open to feedback, and a willingness to change.

John Ng, *Ph.D*
President
Meta

Tel: (65) 6419 5255
Fax: (65) 6227 7170
Email: john@meta.com.sg
Copyright © Meta Pte Ltd

For past articles on MetaTrends, please log in www.meta.com.sg

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)***

How do we constructively recover from conflict: Read ***Meta Seven Cardinal Steps in Recovery using RECOVER Acronym (Part 1)***

ⁱ Gottman, J.1994. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. A Fireside Book. Simon & Schuster. New York.

ⁱⁱ McCall, M.Jr.1998. *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*. Harvard Business School Press. Boston Massachusetts. USA.