

## TRANSFORMING DIFFERENCES...A LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

People are 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 have disastrous effects for our organization. How we manage people is different too. Some prefer a more autocratic style, others the more democratic approach.

Differences are inevitable. They are, in fact, natural and neutral. We should expect differences. They are neither good nor bad. The critical issue in leadership is how we manage these differences. Although writing from a marital perspective, there is much wisdom in what John Gottman, a leading marriage therapist, asserts, “Lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the differences that are inevitable in any relationship.”<sup>i</sup>

Differences will not make or break an organization but how we manage them will. It is important therefore that we learn how to manage these differences so that we and the organization can grow. I would like to introduce the “Meta Five As” approach to managing differences and making them work for us.

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

Some leaders are simply unaware that people are different. We assume that people are like us. We simply cannot understand why 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 Singaporean Chinese. When we expect them to be like us, we underestimate our cultural differences.

In fact, even among Singaporeans, we are quite different. We have different personalities. For those of us who are familiar with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, I am an extrovert: someone who gets energy from people and situations. I often speak before I think. On the contrary, I have a colleague, who is an introvert: he gets energy from within, 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, my colleague is wondering why I am usually so opinionated and verbose. He drives me crazy and I drive him mad too. We are different and we process information differently.

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

**Accept:** Ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in 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 them as weaknesses.

On the other hand, a 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."<sup>ii</sup>

An extrovert's strength in communicating and sharing ideas can be a weakness, if the person keeps dominating discussions, fails to listen 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, managing strengths before they become weaknesses, learning to take responsibility for actions, being open to feedback, and a willingness to change.

**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.

1. Focus on the supra-ordinate goals.

If we consider the organization's greater objectives, we are prepared to adjust our wants for its sake. I have seen many times, people pulling together in a crisis or team members putting aside their differences to focus on a greater challenge.

2. Constant inculcation of the core values of the organization.

One of Singapore Airlines' core values is safety. In my 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 and the staff are all committed to it. Communicating and strengthening these core values is the job of the leader.

3. Determine if the issue is worth fighting over.

Very often, issues are infused with disproportionate importance. We fight over minor 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?

4. Realize that habits and lifestyles are hard to change.

This will help us become less impatient and more willing to adjust. Moderating our expectations, providing support for any change, and dealing with other people's concerns will help us manage differences more effectively.

However, accommodation becomes difficult, if not impossible, when moral integrity is called into question. Or if there is a consistent pattern of violence and a constant dispute over core beliefs and values. It is incumbent on us as leaders to discuss these issues in a positive way. In these conflicts, we need to focus on the issue and fix the problem rather than attack the person and play the 'blame-game.'

**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 depreciating stance.

I remember that whenever my neighbor complimented me for a good deed in front of my mum, 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. However, affirmation must be done sincerely. Some people refuse to be affirmed because every time they receive any affirmation, it means more work. There's a lack of sincerity and there's strings attached to the affirmation. True affirmation must be unconditional. We need also to affirm effort not just performance. Nothing is more discouraging than to hear leaders deriding their subordinates when they have poured in many hours of work and sacrificed resources to get the job done, albeit unsatisfactorily. It is important to acknowledge the effort and then work through the process of why, in spite of the effort, performance was as expected.

I was so impressed with the introduction of value-added schools and value-added students. This is especially critical in encouraging the average performers. My son is a case in point. He is an average Band-Two student. But recently, he showed improvement in his results, he 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 award spurred him on. Affirmation must also be non-comparative.

**Applaud:** Ability to share in the joy and success of others.

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. 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.”

In contrast, in many organizations today, when our peer succeeds, we feel jealous, we down play their success or worse still, we sabotage their success. When our peer fails, we celebrate. To enter fully into the joy of another’s success presupposes a healthy self-esteem. It also means giving ourselves to helping the other person succeed, lending our credibility, developing people to their fullest potential, and not allowing failures to derail our commitment to people.

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

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

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