



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

by

Robin Denise Johnson, Ph.D.

President, EQUEST, Inc.

NAMIC Executive Leadership Development Program at The Anderson School at UCLA

Email: Robin@DrRobinJohnson.com

MULTICULTURAL TEAMS OFFER POSITIVE PROMISE

Diverse teams are a fact of life at work today. And rightly so! Our companies need the creativity, commitment, mental flexibility, and talent of people with different perspectives working together to solve organizational challenges. Teams in general, and multicultural teams in particular, can tackle complex tasks extremely effectively. Why? Because . . .

- Diverse teams produce a greater number of ideas.
- Diversity of perspective helps teams come up with creative solutions to complex problems.
- Diversity of perspectives requires team members to explore a wide range of viewpoints that generates greater confidence in their final decisions.
- When effective, inclusive multicultural teams produce stronger commitment to decisions.
- Implementation of decisions is easier when people have been involved or represented in the decision-making process.

The diversity that truly matters in this regard is *perspective* diversity. The key factor in high-performing teams is that all of the team members contribute different (diverse) ideas from their various perspectives—with the ideas coordinated to serve the team mission.



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

If diverse teams are so great, then what is the problem? The problem is that the potential for high performance in multicultural teams only becomes real when they are managed well. Your team's demographic diversity will become a distraction from completing your team's mission if members get bogged down in conflicts, stereotypes, or behaviors that disrupt respectful communication of their different perspectives. If the diversity on the team is mismanaged, you will have a poor performing, rather than a high-performing team.

One of the most common mistakes leaders make with multicultural teams is trying to “homogenize away” the differences. Well-meaning people often make this mistake. They think they should be color or gender blind, and all colors and genders may make this mistake, thinking that it's best to treat everyone exactly the same way. However, research shows trying to avoid or wipe away important aspects of people's identity makes it more difficult to bring up, discuss, resolve, and learn from different ways of seeing the world.

Other common mistakes people make on multicultural teams include:

- Focusing on group identity issues to the exclusion of the team mission or task, thereby hurting team **output**.
- Discounting the contributions of demographic minorities if they think those ideas are not as credible (or minorities are not as competent) as majority team members' ideas and skills. Some team members may make stereotypical statements (often unaware) and cause group identity-based conflict that will diminish people's ability to **learn** from each other.
- Making disrespectful statements about team members or people they see as like team members. Team members will not be **satisfied** if they do not feel respected in the team, or they feel all team members are not being respected equally. We learn as much by watching as by doing, and when we see people disrespected, for whatever



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

reason, we know—on some level and in certain situations—that we, too, could be disrespected for having a different perspective.

Your job in leading your multicultural team to high performance is to create and sustain an environment that encourages and protects perspective diversity. Perspective diversity is the gold to mine on a diverse team.

RESEARCH REPORT: FIVE WAYS TO MINE DIVERSITY GOLD IN TEAMS

Based on research in progress by Dr. Robin J. Elyⁱ

Robin Ely of Harvard Business School continues her research into the conditions that make it probable that demographic diversity and multiculturalism will deliver their promise of high performance in work teams. Ely and Thomas' earlier research published in "Cultural Diversity at Work: The effects of diversity perspectives on work group processes and outcomes" put forth a new paradigm for understanding the value of diversity and suggested ways to manage diversity for effective team results. Their research provides powerful support for the idea that learning from different perspectives is *THE* key factor in creating high performing multicultural teams. Rather than report the details from Ely's most recent research report, I will organize her findings into 5 steps you can take to mine perspective diversity gold on your multicultural team.

1. Use both types of learning available in multicultural teams.

Mine the specific learning that comes from the team members' social identity and cultural knowledge.



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

Actively seek and use information that comes from members' cultural knowledge, especially when there is an obvious link between cultural knowledge and task. An example would be asking Latinos/Spanish speaking team members to investigate issues related to the pursuit of a Latino target market.

Encourage and support the learning that comes through the interaction of people with different perspectives when performing generic interpersonal management tasks. Generic interpersonal tasks are things such as giving feedback, managing conflict, or coaching people.

For example, a team member complains that a male member is 'rude'. Ask them, "what did that member do or say that you saw as rude?" The response might be, "he interrupted everyone." You could handle an impending team conflict right away by offering an alternative interpretation of that behavior. In masculine culture, interrupting signals passion and commitment to ideas. At the same time you affirm that you can see how interrupting might be construed as rude when people expect others to offer their ideas and then shut up while others take their fair share of air time (as many women do). Bring this example back to the team. You can then simultaneously manage impending team conflict, provide feedback to the interrupter about how that behavior could be seen, and educate team members about some common gender—culture behavior differences and interpretations.



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

2. See cultural and social identity as a team resource.

People's social identity is a source of insight, skill, and experience that are valuable potential resources to the team. Having a climate where social identity is seen as a resource for learning makes a positive difference for creating and sustaining high performing multicultural teams.

Ely's research is specific in demonstrating how avoiding diversity discussions, avoiding conflict around social identity, trying to homogenize away differences, or have a culture where social identity is invisible, all contribute to low performance on diverse teams. And it doesn't matter whether it's whites, people of color, men, or women, for instance, saying, "I don't see race," or "I don't see gender."

In the Learn-from-Differences perspective of Ely and Thomas' research you must actively seek and use differences as a team resource. It's better, they found, to treat cross-cultural experiences as opportunities to learn—even negative experiences like discrimination—rather than to avoid or to suppress them. If you try to minimize, avoid, or suppress differences due to demographics, you end up making the potentially negative experiences un-discussable. And then it is just a matter of time before unresolved conflicts infect your team.

3. Understand how diversity dimensions are axes of power in society.

Ely's research demonstrates that race, ethnicity and culture matter in teams, because they are axes of power within many societies. We all learn in teams by experimenting, by seeking, using and giving feedback, by asking for help, and generally taking a risk to put our ideas out



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

there. However, because of the way demographics work, multicultural minority team members risk their careers in climates where stereotypes abound or where people pretend to be color or gender blind.

If those with less power feel the leader and some or all of their teammates are closed minded, then that diverse team is likely to under perform.

If people with less power in society are not operating in an inclusive, respectful climate at work, then lower-power minorities are less likely to open up – and are even less likely to share with their white teammates how they are feeling about the climate.

According to the research study, when team members found the climate closed to learning and disrespectful of any of its member's ideas, then overall the team performed poorly.

4. Create and sustain a positive (demographic and perspective) diversity climate.

Ely's research found that a positive view of the climate and learning behaviors from all team members—white and multicultural—made for more effective diverse teams. But one of the most surprising findings Robin Ely had was that the minority members' perceptions about the team's openness to different perspectives made the most significant difference.

If White/Anglo/Caucasian team members think everything is fine on the team, that they are open-minded, that they value everyone's opinion—that's great. But, according to this powerful research of over 800 multicultural teams, it is the opinion and perception of the multicultural



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

members that the team is open to learning from differences that really matter.

The behaviors associated with an open-to-learning-from-different-perspectives climate include:

- A team leader who encourages different styles and approaches to solving work problems,
- Team members and leaders who actively seek, value, and use different perspectives,
- Team members who are encouraged by the leader, and each other, to offer new and better ways to do things.

The way to leverage the learning in diverse teams is actually to seek and use ALL the different perspectives. This is good news because it means an inclusive approach that is actually good leadership for any team.

5. Use metrics to motivate and celebrate team achievement.

High performing teams get the job done (output), learn from each other (learning) and enjoy working together (satisfaction).ⁱⁱ By calculating and sharing the performance results, and linking it to the contributions from all the team members, you reinforce the learn-from-differences norm within your multicultural team.

High performance metrics in Ely's research included:

- *Revenue from new sales,*
- *Higher customer satisfaction ratings, and*
- *Five weighted performance measures.*



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

POWERFUL RESEARCH SUPPORTS VALUE OF DIVERSITY FOR TEAM PERFORMANCE

Ely's research is very powerful for a number of reasons. First of all, she examined 800 real, diverse work teams. This is not about people in labs. Nor is it about individuals aggregated together and called teams. These are real work teams. It is rare in team research to have real teams, to have enough real teams to get measurable results, to have work teams rather than lab groups, (that meet social science criteria for being defined as a real team rather than a team-in-name only), and to have diverse-multicultural teams.

Second, it is methodologically powerful. She was looking at dynamics in teams, and specifically at the interpersonal interactions and the resultant effects from those interactions. Statistically there were no significant main effects. But there were robust, statistically significant, interaction effects related to the outcome/performance measures. What that means is that the research finding here is a function of group level dynamics—not an individual level phenomenon. This is rare in team research.

Third, this research found powerful interaction effects (the behaviors between members of diverse teams—especially learning from differences) that drive actual performance outcomes—sales, customer satisfaction, and performance. We've been waiting for this kind of research linking real diverse work teams to quantified performance outcomes. Brava Dr. Ely!



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

RESEARCH CONCLUSION

Diversity Climate, Learning Behaviors, and Demographic diversity interact in real work teams to affect sales, customer satisfaction and performance.

To mine perspective diversity gold for high performance on your multicultural team:

- 1. Use both types of learning available in multicultural teams.**
- 2. See cultural and social identity as a team resource.**
- 3. Understand how diversity dimensions are axes of power in society.**
- 4. Create and sustain a positive (demographic and perspective) diversity climate.**
- 5. Use metrics to motivate and celebrate team achievement.**



Mining Perspective Gold for a High Performing Multicultural Team

REFERENCES

Ely, R.J. 2007. Work in Progress Research Report at the Anderson School of Management at UCLA. Westwood, CA. April 6.

Ely, R.J. and D.A. Thomas. 2001. "Cultural diversity at work: The effects of diversity-perspectives on work group processes and outcomes." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46:229-273.

Hackman, J.R. 1987. "The design of work teams." In J.W. Lorsch (ed.), *Handbook of Organizational Behavior*: 315-342. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Johnson, R.D. 2007. "Leading your multicultural team to high performance." Audio-book. Claremont, CA: EQUEST.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dr. Robin Denise Johnson is an author, speaker, coach and educator in multicultural leadership development. She worked as an international finance professional for 10 years before earning her doctorate at Harvard in Organizational Behavior. She taught on the faculty at the University of Virginia and UCLA business schools but currently minds her own business—EQUEST, Inc.—and organizes a multicultural executive coaching network.

Dr. Robin J. Ely is a Professor of Organizational Behavior at Harvard Business School. She investigates how organizations can better manage their race and gender relations while at the same time increasing their effectiveness. She has taught courses in statistics and group dynamics, with a special emphasis on race, ethnicity, and gender relations as relations of power. She received her Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from Yale University.

NOTES

ⁱ Robin Ely presented her research at the Anderson School at UCLA in 2007 attended by the author. The publication associated with this research is current under review in academic journals. Dr. Ely gave Dr. Johnson permission to summarize and share the results of her research with practitioners in audio and written media.

ⁱⁱ J.R. Hackman's criteria for evaluating performance in teams. See references.