

The Search for True Diversity

It's not as black and white as it looks. Tim Bentley on hiring outside the lines.

For decades, “diversity hiring” has focused primarily on race and gender, triggered by often legitimate efforts but frequently by “box-checking” exercises as well.

These days, though, decision makers are looking to broaden the definition of a diverse workforce. “What is really important is hiring somebody who doesn’t think like you,” says Rosanna Fiske, the diversity committee chair for the Public Relations Society of America and a principal at Rise Strategies in Miami.

In other words, bringing aboard people who represent a broader array of backgrounds. “We get hung up on the visible diversity – race, age, ethnicity, sometimes sexual orientation and physical disabilities,” says B.J. Gallagher, a Los Angeles diversity consultant and author of *A Peacock in the Land of Penguins: A Tale of Diversity and Discovery*. “That doesn’t really tell you what kind of manager I am or whether I’m creative or whether I have imagination or what my buying patterns are.”

In fact, she adds: “You can have a whole room full of middle-age heterosexual white guys who might be really different from one another and all over the spectrum.”

Indeed, diversity of thought is growing more crucial for leaders, marketers and others who want to connect with audiences that seem to become more heterogeneous by the minute. But to hire for that, companies need to “delve into the candidate’s background more – how they were brought up, their schooling, and some understanding of their value system, work ethic and habits,” says Fiske. “You have to hire for what people bring to the table, and the more differences of thought they bring the better.”

No one is discounting the need for visible diversity. But “invisible diversity” is where the real work begins.

Before You Hire

In the very beginning, before the first classified ad is placed, it’s important to map out – and commit to writing – an exhaustive strategic plan to initiate an attitude of diversity, complete with reasons.

“One of the things management has to be real clear on is their purpose in bringing someone in,” says Simone Caruthers, senior adjunct professor at the Leadership Trust at Duke University. By emphasizing the different qualities sought even before the hiring is done, the decision maker can better advocate for diversity as well as for the specific hiring decision.

This upfront work is critical. “The best opportunity for success is if you think about what you need before you even think about who should fill the position on the team,” says Lisa Haneberg, owner of Haneberg Management in Seattle, which consults on management and leadership. “Your best chance of success is before your biases and your judgments and everything get in the way.”

Haneberg recalls a client whose director-level hiring decision came down to two similarly qualified finalists. One candidate was, in Haneberg’s words, a “maintainer” of the status quo who would have been more comfortable to senior leaders, a good fit in the organization. The other candidate was “a live wire that everyone knew would be a pain in the butt.”

As the company examined what it really needed – innovative strategy – it hired the live wire, contrary to what senior management traditionally might have done. The result? “The live wire has been the most influential manager in the company because he mentions new ideas and stirs things up,” says Haneberg. “He is the one in staff meetings who, when everyone is ready to go down the same old road, will stop them and ask why they’re still doing it.”

During the Hiring

Many workplaces, simply because of their nature, are filled with “yes people.” Quite simply, it’s easier to hire people just like you. As John Putzier says, “It’s like clones. There’s no creativity, no innovation, no real dynamics.”

Putzier, author of *Weirdos in the Workplace: The New Normal ...Thriving in the Age of the Individual*, contends that “diversity is individuality. Not all white men think and act alike. Nor do all women think and act alike. It’s very simplistic and actually insulting to try to categorize people into those groups.” In particular, hiring creative people can sometimes stretch the comfort zone. “Einstein, Edison, they were geniuses but they were wackos. What high-tech company today wouldn’t want to hire Einstein or Edison,” says Putzier. “Along with that comes some baggage.”

So, how to pull that off? For one thing, Putzier says, more than one person should interview applicants to ensure diversity of thought. He points to an airline, and suggests that pilots might be interviewed by reservationists, baggage handlers by flight attendants.

Fiske of the Public Relations Society recommends varying the

sources from which you seek talent. “You can’t go back to the same well if you want to get a different flavor of water,” she says. If, for example, a particular headhunter has been successful in the past finding applicants who fit in well with your organization, think about adding or changing headhunters to ensure variety.

Behavioral hiring models can help too, revealing qualities that aren’t necessarily obvious, Haneberg notes. “Once you get practice at behavioral interviewing questions, what you are actually finding out is ... the way that people will approach things,” she says. The result: more true diversity.

After the Hire


Hiring doesn’t mean you’re done. In fact, support at this point is crucial.

In the situation of the live wire, for example, management would have to remind employees why that unconventional hire was made. The company culture can eat new or unusual players alive.

“The workplace can be similar to an immune system,” says Caruthers at Duke. “For many, the job is to seek and destroy. Focusing on why that person was hired – specifically the need

the applicant filled that no one else could – goes a long way toward staff acceptance.” Caruthers also recommends quickly hiring additional nontraditional applicants so that peers can be supportive of each other when the inevitable immune system begins doing its job.

Another idea, says Gallagher: Try a month-long experiment to eliminate the word “they” from your organization’s vocabulary. “Consider the possibility that there is only WE – there is no THEY,” she says. “You’ll see what this simple change in language does to how you and others think about solving problems, generating creative ideas, getting the work done,” among other things.

Judy Tso, a social scientist, speaker, consultant and president of Aha Solutions Unlimited in Boston, compares the post-hiring period to that oft-painful time so many of us can relate to: “It’s like high school. It can be a very hostile environment. Other employees need to make it a welcoming environment, not just a begrudging tolerance.” 

Nonfiction writer Tim Bentley has also held executive positions in corporate America and government.

Stereotype? Yes, You Probably Do

Stereotypes are part of social and organizational life, says B.J. Gallagher, in her book, *Pigeonholed in the Land of Penguins*. Some of the ways we classify:

- 1. We assume things about another person, based only on their occupation.** (“Typical salesman!”)
- 2. We assume that everyone in a category is like everyone else in that category.** (“You know how those engineers are.”)
- 3. We assume that certain categories of people are naturally suited to specific activities or jobs.** (“Wow, you’re tall. ...You played basketball in high school, didn’t you?” or “Women can have great careers in human resources or public relations.”)
- 4. We discount information from some people, based on a category we put them in.** (“What does he know? He’s only a clerk!”)
- 5. We limit career advancement and job changes for others, because we see them as suited only for one type of position.** (“She applied for a job in marketing? But she’s always worked in human resources!”)
- 6. We make assumptions based on a person’s physical appearance, rather than learning about his or her abilities, skills and interests.** (“He sure doesn’t look like a CEO.”)
- 7. We attribute characteristics to people based only on one piece of information about them.** (“He’s Japanese. ...He must be smart.” or “She’s a professional athlete. ...She must be lesbian.”)