

TALENT MANAGEMENT

# Does Diversity Actually Increase Creativity?

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Setting aside social, political, and moral reasons for encouraging a more diverse workplace, there is arguably no better incentive for promoting diversity than the premise that diverse teams and organizations are more creative. But is there actually any evidence in support of this idea? And if there is, do the potential gains in creativity produced by diversity come [at the expense](#) of interpersonal harmony and team cohesion? Here are seven findings from science:

**There's a difference between generating ideas and implementing ideas.** While diverse team composition does seem to confer an advantage when it comes to generating a wider range of original and useful ideas, experimental [studies](#) suggest that such benefits disappear once the team is tasked with deciding which ideas to select and implement, presumably because diversity hinders consensus. A meta-analysis of 108 studies and more than 10,000 teams indicated that the creativity gains produced by higher team diversity are disrupted by the inherent social conflict and decision-making deficits that less homogeneous teams create. It would therefore make sense for organizations to increase diversity in teams that are focused on [exploration](#) or idea generation, and use more-homogeneous teams to curate and implement those ideas. This distinction mirrors the psychological competencies associated with the creative process: divergent thinking, openness to experience, and mind wandering are needed to produce a large number of original ideas, but unless they are followed by convergent thinking, expertise, and effective project management, those ideas will never become actual innovations. For all the talk about the importance of creativity, the critical piece is really innovation. Most organizations have a surplus of creative ideas that are never implemented, and more diversity is not going to solve this problem.

**Good leadership helps.** The conflicts arising from diversity can be mitigated if teams are [effectively led](#). This is hardly surprising: leadership is a fundamental resource for groups and organizations. It is the psychological process that enables individuals to set aside their selfish agendas to cooperate with others for the common benefit of the team, articulating the [natural tension](#) between our desire to get ahead of others and our need to get along with others. All of this is particularly important when teams are diverse, for it will be harder for team members to see things from other members' perspectives, empathize with them, and suppress their own conscious and unconscious biases.

**Too much diversity is problematic.** Most studies assume that the relationship between diversity and creativity is linear, but recent [evidence](#) suggests that a moderate degree of diversity is more beneficial than a higher dose. This finding is consistent with the [too-much-of-a-good-thing](#) paradigm in management science, which provides compelling evidence for the idea that even the most desirable qualities have a dark side if taken to the extreme. In other words, all things are good in moderation (except moderation).

**Deep-level diversity is key.** Most discussions about diversity focus on demographic variables (e.g., [gender, age, and race](#)). However, the most interesting and influential aspects of diversity are psychological (e.g., personality, values, and abilities), also known as [deep-level diversity](#). Indeed, there are several advantages to focusing on deep-level variables as opposed to demographic factors. First, whereas demographic variables perpetuate stereotypical and prejudiced characterizations, deep-level diversity focuses on the individual, allowing a much more granular understanding of human diversity. Regardless of whether you focus on bright- or dark-side personality characteristics, motives and values, or indeed creativity, group differences are trivial when compared with differences between individuals, even when the individuals are part of the same group.

**Knowledge sharing is key.** No matter how diverse the workforce is, and regardless of what type of diversity we examine, diversity will not enhance creativity unless there is a culture of [sharing knowledge](#). Studies mapping the [social networks](#) of organizations have found higher levels of creativity in groups that are more interconnected, particularly when [creative and intrapreneurial](#) individuals are a central node in those networks.

**Cynics are persuadable.** Unlike coaching, which tends to benefit those who need it the least (those who really need it are, alas, often uncoachable), diversity training is most effective with individuals who are [skeptical](#) of it. This is encouraging, though the challenge, of course, is to ensure that people who are cynical about diversity actually enroll in these training programs.

**Other factors are much more salient.** Although the question of whether diversity can foster creativity is both interesting and important, it is important to note that there are many other more influential drivers of creativity. As a seminal [meta-analysis of 30 years](#) of research showed, support for innovation, vision, task orientation, and external communication is the strongest determinant of creativity and innovation; most input variables, including team composition and structure, have much weaker effects. Likewise, developing expertise, assigning people to tasks that are meaningful and interesting, and improving creative thinking skills will produce [higher gains](#) in both individual and team creativity than focusing on diversity will. It should also be noted that a better way to promote both creativity and diversity is to select employees on the basis of their creativity, as opposed to their cognitive ability or educational credentials, for that alone [would enhance](#) the typical diversity level of organizations. In that sense, creativity may lead to diversity more than vice versa.

In short, there are probably much better reasons for creating a diverse team and organization than boosting creativity. And if your actual goal is to enhance creativity, there are simpler, more effective solutions than boosting diversity.

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