OPINION

Diversity: the choice between chaos or inflexibility

The increasing diversity of companies and societies throws up some fundamental dilemmas. Too little means inflexibility, too much means chaos. The challenge lies in how to achieve a synthesis writes *Peter T. FitzRoy*.

Diversity is forged out of differences in age, gender, experience, education, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, work and family status, professional background, religion, race and ethnicity. It is a very broad concept that influences an individual's world view and opens up group conflicts or synergies.

UPSIDE

A diverse firm with multiple inputs is more adaptive and responsive when dealing with highly complex and uncertain tasks. Some firms achieve this by recruiting senior managers from outside, other use consultants with experience across many different firms and industries. Diversity in perspective and ways of thinking is also critical for creativity and innovation, which is often achieved through cross-functional teams. Firms which encourage diversity attract better talented, creative staff and are less susceptible to 'group think'.

DOWNSIDES

Too little diversity limits debate and results in 'group think', reduced creativity and an insular and narrow approach. By contrast, too much can cause conflict, a lack of communication and trust, information overload and slower decision making.

SYNTHESIS

A firm needs both diversity and unity. Diversity encourages creativity, specialisation and alternative ways of thinking, but coherence is also vital. Staff must have a shared vision and this is accomplished when the firm develops vision and value statements and gains the individual's commitment, thus minimising chaos and stimulating creativity.

DIVERSITY WITHIN A SOCIETY

Diversity is essential to social development. Ultimately, differences in culture are more difficult to reconcile than those in education or income. Too little creates rigidity, as demonstrated in China in the 1400's and Singapore more recently. Such societies tend to be complacent, prize conformity and are not very adaptive. However there is a limit to diversity as seen in the anarchy of the Balkans. It also appears that differences in culture are more difficult to reconcile than those in education or income. Many countries, including Australia, are presently debating diversity and the question being addressed, not always openly, is whether or not certain immigrants should be excluded. Should societies exclude individuals on the basis of their views? If so, how do we test for this?

A successful multicultural society runs on mutual respect and concern, tolerance, self-restraint and the ability to live with unresolved differences. It rejects dogmatic, self-righteous and impatient citizens and fosters a common sense of belonging, loyalty and national identity that respects legitimate cultural differences. Specifying the moral structure for public life is not easy. Should it be language? Should it be more? Does it include the values of a liberal democracy such as the rule of law, the treatment of minority groups, or the role of women?

The challenge for any company or society is to find a synthesis since both extremes lead to problems. For a business, this synthesis can be accomplished through the development of vision and value statements. The problem is more difficult for a society, since integration requires the development of a set of essentially culture-free values which can provide the unifying 'glue' which both holds the society together and permits it to develop and change.

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