

Diversity? Yes, but for real!

The topic of diversity is omnipresent. There is probably agreement that people should have the same opportunities on the labour market regardless of their gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity, for example. But when it is argued that diverse teams are more successful, we probably have to go deeper, as the example of a client illustrates.

Peter Näf

My client is a manager in a highly specialised field. In his function, he has to make decisions that not only have far-reaching consequences for the company; the problems cannot be solved according to scientific criteria or based on numbers. He has to make judgements, weigh up aspects against each other and prioritise. The problems can also be solved differently with good arguments - in short: there is no right or wrong.

I was impressed by the way he dealt with this challenge: he recruited the most diverse characters for his team of eight, so that as many points of view as possible flow into the solutions to the problems.

Diverse means different

As an example, he mentioned a principle-oriented employee who is the team conscience for the consideration of all legal and compliance-related aspects. Her counterpart is an employee with a more open and creative approach. This is just one example of complementary characters in his team. He sees himself as a «conductor» in problem solving, moderating the discussion of his specialists and leading them to a joint solution for

which he then bears full responsibility.

It is about real differences

This shows that real diversity starts where the fun stops. When working with different, and therefore often opposing, characters, we often move outside our comfort zone and reach our limits.

On the other hand, diversity can only appear to be so when viewed superficially. A group of people mixed e.g., by ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation can be quite homogeneous: they may come from a similar socio-economic background, have studied the identical theories as academics at universities, share a similar world view and inform themselves in the same media. And so, we have exactly the opposite of diversity. The fact that, for example, women think differently than men may be true on average, but not necessarily in individual cases.

And the team may have found each other because of sympathy. This happens when recruitment is not aimed at gaining missing skills or characteristics to complement the team, but when new employees are selected by existing team members. These often select their colleagues on the basis of whether they feel like working with them.

So, if we take diversity seriously in terms of improving performance, we need to make sure that it is more than just a handful of colourful smarties that all look different but have the same thing in them.

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