



# Embracing Our Differences

Reversing the cycle of disengagement  
by building stronger teams

BY EVAN HACKEL

After giving a keynote talk on leadership a few weeks ago, someone in the audience told me something surprising. “All kinds of people work in my company, but I have to admit that I relate best to those who are about my age and have a similar background and experience to mine,” he confessed. “That might not be the best thing for a leader to say, but that’s how I feel.”

While having these same kinds of preferences is not unusual, it’s important to recognize that staying within your comfort zone may stifle your company’s growth and success. After all, the job of a leader is to engage everyone—not only certain segments. Here are a few ways to expand your team and engage a wider range of talent on staff:

## Involve People Who Are Different

Many executives find comfort in building teams of people who are just like them. While that’s a normal tendency, it can create the impression that only certain types of people can contribute and succeed within the organization.

As you build your team, work to include a wider range of players. For example, seek out people who have a higher tolerance for risk than you do, and let them try things that you would find too risky. Include people who have strengths that are different from yours and traits that positively reflect on what your organization does. Regardless of age, background or belief system, each group deserves a representative seat at the table. Strong teams also include stakeholders from each major business sector such as technology, sales, operations and marketing. And finally, avoid the comfort of surrounding yourself with “yes” people. You need people who have the courage to challenge your ideas and introduce alternative points of view.

## Value Your Millennials

Millennials are the future of your organization, so make sure they are an integral part of your team. After all, they are the ones who are proposing technological solutions to business problems that others might not see. And even though their work style may differ from yours, the bottom line is that they have a lot to offer.

I encourage you to welcome their drive to succeed. They don’t just want to know whether they can build a future in your company, they want to know exactly how. Early on, it is important explain the behaviors, skills and outlooks that are valued in your company. Ask about their values and invite them to help discover ways to achieve their goals with your organization. Create an environment where they can be heard. Solicit their ideas and consider them. When it’s possible, use their ideas, and offer guidance and acknowledgement when you can’t. And try to offer them some autonomy. Too many rules can stifle anyone’s ambition, but they seem to negatively affect millennials’ satisfaction and performance most of all.

## Create an Organization Where Many People Belong

This is a tall order but worth striving for. Each organization is home to many different kinds of people—from college interns to those who are returning to the workforce after raising children. How can you motivate each of them to invest their time and energy in working for you?



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- **Invest in excellent training.** It will repay you many times over in improved performance, reduced turnover and a healthier company culture.
- **Make communications a top priority.** Ideas and information need to flow freely throughout the ranks, not only up and down the organizational chart.
- **Create forums where all employees can be heard.** An effective approach is holding open meetings where everyone has an equal voice and all ideas are captured on whiteboards and discussed.

- **Be inclusive.** Invite everyone to help define your company's vision and what it stands for. It's not up to the president or CEO to handle this alone. The more you invite everyone into the process, the more invested they become in your company.
- **Offer excellent benefits.** If you're not providing the best, your employees may begin to look for jobs at other companies that are offering more.
- **Value and support your employees' families.** That can mean offering flextime, on-site childcare and other extras. In many cases, the long-term benefits of having a stable employee base will outweigh the costs.

## Inspire Your Future Leaders

Considering who will lead your company in the future is a positive move, so think about succession planning. The more you can encourage everyone who works for you to envision a bright future for themselves, the healthier your organization will become. ☺

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