

“EMBRACE DIVERSE STYLES IN THE WORKPLACE”



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When diversity in organizations is discussed, it is typically in the context of gender, race, ethnicity, etc. However, there are other ways in which co-workers can differ that are much more subtle, and yet can have a profound impact - either positively or negatively - on working relationships and business results.

When people with opposite styles work together it can either create positive synergy, or it can create friction and conflict. The challenge, for the manager especially, is to be cognizant and appreciative of those differences, and focus on the value that different styles can bring to the team. It requires that the manager work through his or her own feelings of personal discomfort that are triggered when working with an opposite style. This is easier said than done, but when the manager is open and committed to creating an environment where differing styles can work together, everybody wins.

Consider this scenario: Darren has a preferred style of being orderly, planful, and systematic. He is most comfortable having all of his "ducks in a row" before having a discussion or a staff meeting. Darla, on the other hand, has a more free-flowing work style that is considered spontaneous and creative. She sees possibilities that others sometimes don't, and planning too far ahead is too contrary to her natural working style. It feels restraining and limiting to her best potential.

When Darren required Darla to submit her working plans too far in advance, which satisfied his needs, she resisted or procrastinated. She was not intentionally being difficult - for her, planning too far in advance limited the possibilities for optimum solutions. Until Darren and Darla had the opportunity to identify and understand each other's styles and preferences, they would frequently feel frustrated with one another. Admittedly, Darren had occasionally had thoughts of letting Darla go, and Darla had had thoughts of quitting due to these conflicts.

When they were able to look objectively at their own styles and begin to understand each other's, they could more easily see how their opposite approaches had the potential to positively compliment one another. Through respectful dialogue and compromise, they were able to come to an understanding of how best to leverage their opposite styles. They were able to do so in a way that did not make either person feel that they were de-valuing themselves in the process.

Not all working relationships resolve their conflict this successfully, however. All too frequently, the unaware manager uses his or her position to automatically "trump" the styles of those in his or her team. They have a need to stay in their personal comfort zone, and they expect everyone to adapt to and comply with their own preferences. While unstated, the message becomes "my way or the highway," and can quickly alienate those valuable contributors who do what they do well, but do it in a different mode. This frequently contributes to unnecessary employee turnover, which is costly to an organization.

The wise manager is aware of his or her style, including strengths and limitations. (S)he not only tolerates, but appreciates and strategically manages differences within the team, especially their own. For those for whom this does not come naturally, a healthier approach can be learned with the guidance and support of an insightful leader, coach or mentor.

Adapted from the author's column, previously published in the Syracuse Post Standard