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Review

Teams

Research: To Excel, Diverse Teams Need Psychological Safety

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Summary.   The promise of staffing a team with diverse members is that the different perspectives, ideas, and opinions will result in greater performance. The reality is that diverse teams often underperform because people from dissimilar backgrounds often clash. A...   **more**

When teaching groups of executives, we often ask them how diversity affects teams' performance. The vast majority are convinced that more diverse teams will outperform less diverse

teams — particularly when the project involves innovation. Their argument is familiar: The different perspectives, ideas, and opinions in diverse teams are essential to achieving breakthrough performance in competitive environments.

In practice, however, diverse teams often underperform relative to homogenous teams. Why? They face communication challenges that get in the way of their undeniable potential. It's simple. People with similar backgrounds share norms and assumptions about how to behave, how to set priorities, and at what pace to do the work. When team members come from different backgrounds, these taken-for-granted habits frequently clash; even what counts as "evidence" to support an opinion varies across fields. The result is misunderstanding and frustration. Indeed, past research suggests that, on average, demographic diversity has a negative effect on teams' outcomes.

Our research in drug development, an innovation-intensive setting, suggests that team *psychological safety* — a shared belief that team members will not be rejected or embarrassed for speaking up with their ideas, questions, or concerns — may hold the key to unlocking the benefits of diversity.

Initial Evidence

The theory that psychological safety may be the key to realizing the promise of diversity in teams is not new. But empirical evidence that it's true has been lacking. So we set out to test this idea empirically in a study of 62 drug development teams at six large pharmaceutical firms whose makeup had varying degrees of diversity. The diverse teams' work involved collaborating with external partners, meeting tight deadlines, and developing drugs that had to meet high regulatory standards for safety and efficacy. We measured diversity using a composite index (including gender, age, tenure, and functional expertise) and psychological

safety using an established survey measure. We collected team performance ratings from senior leaders in the companies, who were unaware of the teams' values on our other measures.

Here is what we found. As predicted, on average, team diversity had a slight negative effect on performance. However, in those teams with high psychological safety, diversity was positively associated with performance. By contrast, diversity was even more negatively associated with performance for teams with lower psychological safety than the average. Although ours is only a single study in a single industry and more research is required to confirm our findings, our data support the compelling arguments about the role of psychological safety in unlocking the potential of diverse teams.

Psychological Safety, Diversity, and Team Performance

In a study of 62 drug development teams at six large pharmaceutical firms whose makeup had varying degrees of diversity, those that were diverse *and* psychologically safe outperformed comparably diverse teams that lacked psychological safety.

● Teams with high psychological safety

● Teams without high psychological safety

PERFORMANCE — LOW ← → HIGH

DIVERSITY — LOW ← → HIGH

▽ HBR
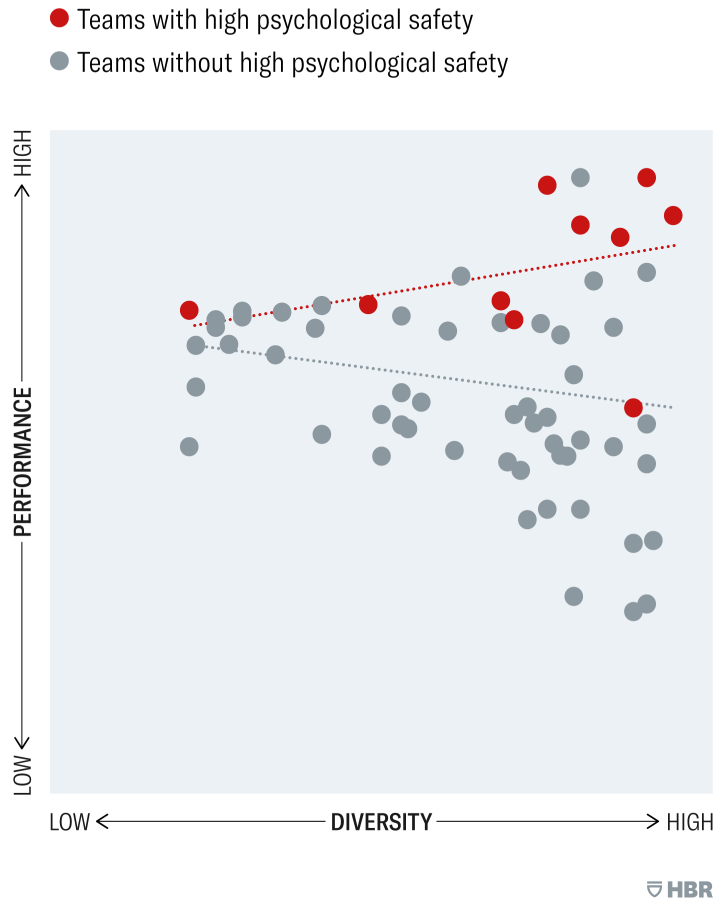
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Another finding — one that's especially important given the mass resignations that have been sweeping the United States — is that team diversity was inversely correlated with members' satisfaction with their team: On average, people were less happy with their team, the more diverse it was. But for the subset of teams with high levels of psychological safety, the more diverse the teams, the more satisfied their members were. In short, psychological safety appears to help teams realize the potential of diversity for both performance and well-being.

We recommend three ways for diverse teams, starting with team leaders, to build psychologically safe environments: framing, inquiry, and bridging boundaries.

Framing

Framing is about helping team members reach a common understanding of the work and the context. Two frames are particularly relevant for diverse teams: goals for the meeting and the value of expertise.

Frame meetings as opportunities for information-sharing. Most team meetings are implicitly framed as updating and decision-making encounters — a framing associated with judgment and evaluation. This frame makes people less willing to speak up and raise questions or concerns and offer novel ideas. To override this default frame, it helps to open a meeting by making the sharing of information and ideas an explicit goal. Then, make sure to systematically invite people with different perspectives to join the conversation, one by one, and listen to and capture what they have to say before moving on to consider the implications of these perspectives and make decisions.

Frame differences as a source of value. All of us are prone to being frustrated by differences in opinion or perspective. Even if we recognize differences as sources of potential value and opportunities for learning, overcoming our instinctive preference for agreement takes effort. Being explicit in framing differences as a source of value can help. For instance, say: "We are likely to have different perspectives going into this meeting, which will help us arrive at a fuller understanding of the issues in this decision (or project)."

Inquiry

The best way to help people contribute their thoughts is to ask them to do so. It's that simple. When team leaders — and others — practice genuine inquiry that draws out others' ideas, listening thoughtfully to what they hear in response, psychological safety in the team grows. The need for inquiry is heightened in diverse teams because of the number and variety of perspectives represented. But inquiry is rarely spontaneous; all of us bring blind spots to our teams — gaps in knowledge or understanding of which we are unaware — and we virtually never ask questions about things we don't know we don't know.

The willingness to listen — *really* listen — to what others are saying is not a given, particularly in diverse teams. It takes practice and involves asking the right kinds of questions:

Open questions. The most effective questions for leveraging diverse perspectives and experiences lack a predetermined answer and are motivated by a desire to learn. Examples: *What do you see in your community? Or, What are you hearing from customers?*

Questions that build shared ownership and causality.
Questions that reflect the complexity of integrating diverse views comprise a powerful tool. For example: *What did I do to put you in a challenging position? How can I help?* Contrast this systemic framing with the following questions that fail to recognize the possibility that you also contributed to the problems or challenges at hand: *What did you do to create this situation? What will you do about it?*

Bridging Boundaries

Framing and inquiry help build psychologically safe environments. But getting even more tactical, what can individual team members do to bridge expertise and background

boundaries? What do they really need to know about each other to gain traction in their collaborative work? They don't have to know each other's entire life story or body of expertise. But they do need to figure out where their objectives, expertise, and challenges come together. Any two people — or members of the entire team — can do that by seeking the following information about each other.

- *Hopes and goals.* What do you want to accomplish?

- *Resources and skills.* What do you bring to the table?

- *Concerns and obstacles.* What are you up against? What are you worried about?

We have found these questions to be surprisingly efficient in providing a foundation for moving forward. They are all task-relevant; none is overly personal, but each requires you to open up and leave yourself vulnerable to others.

While diversity of backgrounds is generally a requirement for breakthrough performance, particularly when seeking innovation, it is rarely sufficient. Diverse teams need the lubricant of psychological safety to ensure that their members ask questions and share ideas. Leaders, and other team members, play a crucial role in nurturing psychological safety through framing, inquiry skills, and a capacity to step in to bridge different perspectives. When this happens, teams stand to gain more than just performance benefits. Effective leadership of diverse teams also builds a healthier work environment and a more satisfying team experience.

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Teams: How to Build Teams that Lead, Innovate, and Succeed, co-authored with Deborah Ancona, was published in August (Harvard Business Review Press, 2023).

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