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Study: Embrace the 'Dwight Schrutes' in your office for better performance

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New research coauthored by a BYU business professor found that "socially distinct newcomers" -- the Dwight Schrutes of the world -- make teams perform better. Credit: Photo illustration by Mark Philbrick/BYU

Nobody wants to share a cubicle with a new hire like Dwight Schrute.

The beet-farming volunteer sheriff's deputy/paper salesman creates many awkward moments because of his differences with co-workers on NBC's "The Office."

But according to new research co-authored by a Brigham Young University business professor, better decisions come from teams that include a "socially distinct newcomer." That's psychology-speak for someone who is different enough to bump other team members out of

their comfort zones.

Researchers noticed this effect after conducting a traditional group problem-solving experiment. The twist was that a newcomer was added to each group about five minutes into their deliberations. And when the newcomer was a social outsider, teams were more likely to solve the problem successfully.

The research is published in the "Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin."

"One of the most-cited benefits of diversity is the infusion of new ideas and perspectives," said study co-author Katie Liljenquist, assistant professor of organizational leadership at BYU's Marriott School of Management. "And while that very often is true, we found the mere presence of a newcomer who is socially distinct can really shake up the group dynamic. That leads to discomfort, but also to a better process that ultimately yields superior outcomes."

The key factor is simply whether newcomers are distinct in some way from the other group members.

"Remember, socially 'distinct' doesn't necessarily mean socially 'inept,'" says Liljenquist, whose co-authors on the paper are Northwestern's Katherine Phillips and Stanford's Margaret Neale. "Dwight's upbringing and past work history - in addition to his bobblehead doll collection - all contribute to the measure of diversity he brings to 'The Office' melting pot."

The paper adds a new wrinkle to the wealth of research on teams, says Melissa Thomas-Hunt, associate professor at Cornell's Johnson School of Management.

"[This research] is groundbreaking in that it highlights that the benefits of disparate knowledge in a team can be unleashed when newcomers actually share opinions of knowledge with old-timers but are socially different," Thomas-Hunt says. "It is the tension between social dissimilarity and opinion similarity that prompts heightened effectiveness in diverse teams."

What explains the results?

According to Liljenquist, newcomers in the experiment didn't necessarily ask tougher questions, possess novel information, or doggedly maintain a conflicting point of view. Just being there was enough to change the dynamic among old-timers who shared a common identity.

When a member of the group discovered that he agreed with the new outsider, he felt alienated from his fellow old-timers — consequently, he was very motivated to explain his point of view on its merits so that his peers wouldn't lump him in with the outsider.

The person who found himself disagreeing with the in-group — and instead agreeing with an outsider - felt very uncomfortable. An opinion alliance with an outsider put his social ties with other team members at risk.

"Socially, that can be very threatening," Liljenquist says. "These folks are driven to say, 'Wait, the fact that I disagree with this outsider doesn't make me weird. Something more is going on here; let's figure out what's at the root of our disagreement.' The group then tends to analyze differing opinions and critical information much more thoroughly, and that facilitates much better decision-making results."

Another revelation

The experiment also revealed a fallacy in the assumptions we make about our own effectiveness in groups. The subjects in the experiment were members of different fraternities and sororities. In general, when the newcomer was from the same sorority or fraternity as the other team members, the group reported that it worked well together, but was less likely to correctly solve the problem.

In contrast, when the newcomer was a member of a rival sorority or fraternity, the opposite was true — these groups felt they worked together less effectively, yet they significantly outperformed socially homogenous groups.

"What's really distinct about this research is that, from a self-reporting perspective, what people perceive to be beneficial turns out to be dead wrong," Liljenquist says. "The teams that felt they worked least effectively together were ironically the top performers!"

In the workplace

Common "social distinctions" in today's workplace, Liljenquist says, would include:

• One employee from accounting working on a team in which everyone else is from sales
• An employee of a company that had just been bought out finding herself on a team of people from the acquiring firm
• An out-of-stater finding himself on a team full of natives of the company's home state

To help employees in those situations cope, managers would be wise to

explain that such conflict can actually generate better results.

"Without that information people just assume, 'This is really uncomfortable. My team obviously must not being working effectively,'" Liljenquist says. "The experience in diverse teams may not always be a feel-good session, but if employees know that from the outset, they can better deal with inevitable conflicts and recognize the potential benefits — that the affective pains can translate to real performance gains."

Although Liljenquist acknowledges many other cases for diversity in the workplace, she contends that "reaping the benefits of diverse workgroups doesn't necessarily require that newcomers bring unique perspectives or expertise to the table. Simply having people around us who differ on some dimension ¬- whether it is functional background, education, race or even a different fraternity - drives a very different decision-making process at a group level because of the social and emotional conflict we experience in their presence."

Source: Brigham Young University (news : web)