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# Stop Hiring Clones of Yourself... there's power in differences

By Barbara Wright-Avlitis



## Stop Hiring Clones of Yourself... There's Power in the Differences

It wasn't too long ago that I met with a CEO of a company who told me that his management team was diverse. "Yes, yes, we have mostly Germans but we also have two Austrians, one Italian and a Swiss." Leadership Diversity means different things to different people. After spending many years looking at the leadership pipeline for several big companies, I began to wonder if CEO's actually value diversity at all. They talk about putting a woman here or there in a key leadership position and are always on the lookout for the rare culturally diverse individual who 'fits' well with the leadership of the organization. They think that's enough. That's really about the letter of the law when it comes to Diversity...including a few people who look different than the rest and we're set. Diversity is so much more than that. The spirit of Diversity is about acceptance as well as appreciation of differences. **That means that a truly diverse leadership team will accept the fact that each member brings a unique perspective on the business. We might even see it as a kind of collaborative coalition of individuals who all want their business to be sustainable and grow but see things from a different viewpoint.**

The trend in most global organizations is for the management team to be like-minded individuals who are very adept in the way to behave in order to get to the top. They are people who know not to 'rock the corporate' boat and to blend into the background enough not to outshine their bosses. They wait in the wings, behaving properly, waiting for their moment to be promoted. I often heard the phrase, "Yes, let's promote him because he is a safe pair of hands." The current system produces homogenized leaders with 'safe' hands. The cream, as we say, floats. This corporate 'cream' ends up being guys who aren't accustomed to challenging their own leaders. Let's face it, if they did, they wouldn't be at the top. They weren't necessarily the overly creative ones and they certainly weren't the ones capable of challenging the status quo. They were the ones who did what was expected of them. They put in long hours and were never involved in controversy or dissent.

During my career, I have seen so many excellent leaders who were passed over, put out to pasture or merely put in a kind of corporate cold storage because they simply had too many strong opinions or even too many good ideas. I recall one case of an extremely talented young man who, perhaps, shone just a little too much. He was always on top of the latest trends and trying to bring innovative approaches to the business. He cared about people and spent a great deal of his time mentoring young professionals. When there was a leadership change at the top, even though he had been earmarked as a high potential, he found himself being moved to head of a branch far away from corporate HQ. In other words, his career was sidetracked because the corporate homogenization process simply didn't work on him. I could spend all the available bandwidth here giving examples of those extraordinary individuals who were either pushed out or neglected because of their uniqueness.

I recently, at the recommendation of a friend, started reading a book about the Presidential Administration of Abraham Lincoln. Who would have thought that a biography of a president would be a page-turner? One message popped off the pages. That message was that **Diversity of perspective in leadership teams CAN be accomplished effectively. People with different mindsets can effectively come together where the 'whole' is certainly greater than the individual pieces.** That's what Abraham Lincoln did. He was the president of a country that had gone to war over the issue of slavery. In a few years he managed to end the war and free the slaves. His cabinet consisted of his former adversaries, brought together and all bringing a very different



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opinion and point of view regarding the issues the nation was facing. He hired them all and put them to work in solving the problems. Sure, it is always more difficult to manage people who disagree with you, or are different from you but through disagreement and discussion, new and different solutions were born. If people with the exact same attitude and perspective come together, you always get the exact same answers. Lincoln's team consisted of some independently wealthy, upper class men as well as some of low birth, middle class men. His cabinet consisted of self-taught individuals as well as Harvard men. It consisted of those with left-wing views and those with right-wing views. It was the inclusive nature of his administration that enabled these men to succeed where no one believed they could even make any headway.

Today, our leaders need to wake up to the fact that our senior leadership ranks are becoming more and more homogeneous. Leaders tend to hire in their own image and shy away from taking a chance on someone who might have a little different perspective on the business. They think that they know the secret to success so everyone should think, look and act just like them. **Too much corporate inbreeding is going to take its toll on creativity, innovation and even business growth.**

Take a chance! Have some courage! Hire a few people who disagree with you. Hire a few people who look and act different than you. They might just look at the picture from a different perspective and find new ways to solve old problems and find new opportunities that were previous considered. An inclusive leadership team can have a powerful impact on your top line.

Do you think today's senior leaders are ready to take this chance?