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# Diversity

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## From the Editor

In a recent article, an author was making the point that we should stop asking the question, "Why?" The argument was that the question why makes people feel uncomfortable.

"Why?" I thought. Do people feel too challenged? Are they afraid that they may not have good reasons? Will they feel inadequate? I suppose that could be the case.

But to surrender the why question is to stop the search for rationale. Without knowing why, we lose the balance between intuition and analysis. By striking why from our vocabulary we would kill the curiosity cat and others wouldn't have access to understanding and insight.

**Why** searches for meaning. **Why** gets to the root of motivation. **Why** moves us beyond yesterday's solutions and blind acceptance.

As I continued the dialogue with the author, I came to the conclusion that we need to be more comfortable with the why question. At LIVE Consultants, we help you ask and hear the question why as you think about the nature of your business.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

## About the Author and the Article

Most of us have been caught saying, "Let's use Pat. It will be easier. We think alike. We'll save time." All too often, we fall into the trap of believing that sameness is best.

In his article, Stephen Baetz writes, "The folly of Narcissus is that it produces a self-congratulatory orthodoxy that limits creativity and may even provoke more conflict."

The author outlines several hunches of why we have a tendency to select the narcissistic option, three simple reasons why there is strength in diversity, and tips for encouraging diversity.

Stephen Baetz is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# The Virtue Of Variance

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“Why would I ever want to give myself more problems?”

It was an honest question, probably one that all of us have asked ourselves.

“My feeling is that Barb and I are very much the same. We think alike, we have similar perspectives on what needs to be done; she would make the same decision that I would if I wasn’t here. Bruce I’m not so sure about. He’s ... he’s, well, you know ... *different* ... different than the rest of us in the department. I don’t feel as comfortable with him as I do with Barb. And as I said, why would I want more problems.”

The decision was an everyday one — who should the internal promotion go to — the response was a familiar one: hire in your own image. Go for sameness. Select the person who is a reflection.

I became curious about Bruce. “You said different. How so?”

“You know ... different.”

“You mean he doesn’t get along well with others?”

“No, not that?”

“He’s not technically sharp?”

“Probably one of the best.”

“Well, is he ...” and then it dawned on me that we might be dealing with one of those ugly, slippery prejudices and so I paused to find the right way to put the issue. My silence betrayed my question.

“No it’s nothing like that either. If I think about it, it has to do with style. He’s so darned cautious and careful about every decision. Most of us in the department are free wheeling and we have learned to trust our instincts more. Like Barb. At least with a decision — even if it turns out to be a bad one — you can always execute it to a positive outcome. Barb’s more one of *us*.”

Perhaps my father was right: Birds of a feather need to flock together. There appears to be an odd comfort some people take in finding their reflection.

We pursued the conversation to a conclusion. I was able to gain agreement that we should think about this some more but I was left

wondering about why there is a tendency to choose the narcissistic option.

Here are some of my hunches.

## Hunch #1: Self Congratulation

To select someone who is our reflection is a way of paying ourselves a compliment. We pat ourselves on the back for having all the right qualities. It doesn’t seem to me that this is a conscious action on our part. But, at an unconscious level, we find satisfaction in rewarding ourselves for having the *right stuff*.

## Hunch #2: Single Right Answer

There is a legendary story about Tom Watson, the driving force behind the creation and development of IBM. Apparently, he was asked how he selected his managerial talent. Watson thought for a brief moment and then said, “I select people who are like I am.” Tom assumed that since he was successful anyone who behaved as he did would also be successful. This approach holds that there is a single path to success.

## Hunch #3: Avoids Conflict

There is a perception that those of like mind will have less conflict with others who think the same. Ironically, frustration can be even higher when we are unable to see past ourselves. Most parents understand that. What do we find most frustrating about our children? They are like we are.

## Hunch #4: Perceived Efficiency

We think that similarity will minimize the amount of time it takes to get everyone on board. Our perception is that, when there are differences, more time has to be invested for efficiency.

This argument may well be true. But creativity and innovation often are sacrificed on the altar of efficiency. Selecting Barb may look like efficiency but it may be the differences that

Bruce brings that produce more creative outcomes.

### Strength in Diversity

The folly of Narcissus is that it produces a self-congratulatory orthodoxy that limits creativity and may even provoke more conflict.

My years as a management educator have brought me to the conclusion that there is strength in diversity for three simple reasons.

- ✓ I have never learned anything from a person who thought like I did.

The best teachers and coaches I ever had were the individuals who held a point of view different than my own. They questioned me. They challenged my perspective. They pushed me to my intellectual or creative limits.

- ✓ You can't get strong pushing at air.

Difference can create conflict. But you can develop stronger ideas when you butt up against a position that is different than your own. Fire has the capacity to make strong.

- ✓ Harmony happens when different voices sing together.

I like the texture of a mosaic, the richness of harmonies, the excitement of a Baroque counterpoint, the taste of sweet and sour.

When opposites are combined, when inside out thinking is encouraged, when different ideas are tried, the creative can happen.

Wayne Gretsky revolutionized the game of hockey by playing it from *behind* the net. He took the point guard play-making position from basketball, turned the offensive zone inside out, placed himself in his "office" behind the net, and played a simple game of give 'n go.

### Manage the Potential Downside

When difference and diversity are valued, there are some people who come to the conclusion that anything goes. Diversity becomes a

licence for any kind of contribution or effort. When questioned, they claim they are just "doing their own thing". Everybody doing their own thing can lead to chaos.

How do you avoid chaos when encouraging diversity?

The answer is by defining purpose and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. In concrete terms, this means defining what business you are in, what you want to be, what the moral benchmarks are, and what you want to achieve. These statements of mission, vision, values, and goals become the glue for the team or organization.

Differences are harmonized by purpose. Alternative solutions are valued as long as they stay inside the values boundary. This means solutions are evaluated on the basis of whether or not they advance us toward our goal and are consistent with our values.

### Encourage Diversity

Given that there is wisdom in valuing difference, here are some tips that I have seen managers use that you might find helpful.

- ✓ Search for opinions different than your own.
- ✓ Protect ideas that seem different.
- ✓ Hire people with different styles and backgrounds.
- ✓ Create "distinct societies" where alternative solutions are valued.
- ✓ Turn ideas upside down.
- ✓ Never stop with one good idea.
- ✓ Make sure that every idea you accept today is different in a significant way from one that you accepted yesterday.

As you lead and motivate your team of people, remember: *It is better to have people consistently thinking than thinking consistently.*

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