

Mentoring to Leverage Diversity: Embrace Differences Over Similarities

There is a lot of discussion about fostering diversity in the workplace, and plenty of advice, theories and suggestions on how to do so. Could the way in which leaders mentor actually harness the power of diversity in organizations today?

According to U.S. Army officer Richard Farnell, the answer is a definitive, “YES!”

“Telling our protégés that diversity matters won’t change a thing. We must demonstrate our commitment to it by deliberately mentoring people who aren’t like us,” Farnell writes in his Apr. 17 *Harvard Business Review* piece, “Mentor People Who Aren’t Like You.”

Perhaps the answer to how to get leaders and organizations on board with this idea rests in the question of why this is so often not the case.

So, why do mentors tend to select subordinates in whom they see themselves?

“It reminds me of something called the ‘Similar to Me’ Bias that we often see in hiring contexts,” says Dr. Rebekah Cardenas, Vice President of Business Development and Assessment Solutions at E·A·S·I·Consult® and she offers the following thought.

Since we cannot evaluate people or situations with complete objectivity, that judgment - as **in the instance of the ‘Similar to Me’ effect** - can significantly effect who is hired, fired and promoted. [\[i\]](#) **The ‘Similar to Me’ bias during an interview can lead a hiring manager to select a candidate simply for having similar interests, backgrounds or other commonalities.**

Simply put, we are naturally more comfortable with people who look and think like us, and who value what we value.

It is not surprising, then that we would be more inclined to see potential in those people with which we share similarities, so wanting to nurture that potential by hiring or mentoring the person most like us is likely to occur.

The danger, of course, is ending up with an organization made up of identical skillsets and interests. Perhaps even more troubling, as Farnell notes, is that through such traditional **mentoring initiatives, “growth and advancement opportunities** go disproportionately to those **who belong to the demographic or social group that’s already in power.”**

So, where does that leave us?

Dr. Cardenas argues that every employee certainly deserves the chance to be further developed through mentoring. But, she adds, not everyone has access to someone who is willing and able to invest in his or her career.

That's where leaders can make a conscious effort to ensure the opportunity is extended to all. It isn't just a question of resources or fairness or "doing the right thing," Cardenas reflects; it also just makes good business sense. Helping each employee reach his or her **potential will leverage the broader organization's levels of creativity, innovation and problem-solving ability.**

Like most organizational issues or concerns, that awareness may be the key to change. Leaders asked to mentor others should be informed about the benefits of mentoring **someone who "isn't like them," benefits which encompass their own growth and learning** in addition to that of the person being mentored. Second, all employees must be made to feel comfortable asking someone they respect to be their mentor to help them develop and advance their career.

According to Farnell, this starts with simply encouraging employees to raise their hands and **share concerns or ask for help, even if they aren't sure the leader will identify with them.**

Although not always the case, quite often, a mentoring relationship formed on "differences" will reveal there is actually more in common than meets the eye, Dr. Cardenas concludes, and both parties will find the relationship enriching and rewarding.

About the Author

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[i] Fiske, P. "[Bias: Identifying, Understanding and Mitigating Negative Biases in your Job Search.](#)" (Science magazine, Oct. 22, 1999).