



Diverse Thinking Encourages Innovation

By Dori Meinert 7/6/2016

Our brains are constantly looking for patterns as a way to understand the world, and those efforts cause us to leap to conclusions and make assumptions that help us navigate our environment.

However, in the business world, where innovation is desired, “assumptions can be very dangerous. People don’t know what we don’t know,” said Ann Herrmann-Nehdi, chief executive officer of Herrmann International in Lake Lure, N.C.

Your organization can be missing some great ideas, said Herrmann-Nehdi, who spoke during a concurrent session at the Society for Human Resource Management 2016 Annual Conference & Exposition in Washington, D.C., in June.

Companies with greater diversity and inclusion have better business results than organizations that don’t, according to numerous studies. The most inclusive companies have a 2.3 times higher cash flow per employee over a three-year period, they are 1.8 times more likely to be ready for change, and they are 1.7 times more likely to be innovation leaders in their market, according to a study by Bersin by Deloitte.

While companies traditionally have focused on gender and ethnic diversity, expanding diversity and inclusion initiatives to include diversity of thought can help link initiatives to business results and gain buy-in, Herrmann-Nehdi said.

Diversity of thought, she said, is “deliberately seeking and integrating different thinking perspectives,” which can lead to better decision-making, problem-solving, innovation and engagement.

“Part of this is understanding that we all have patterns and trying to break those patterns,” she said.

Understanding thinking preferences can help HR professionals communicate with business leaders and aid leaders to be open to more perspectives from a broader array of employees.

The four thinking styles or preferences are:

- Analytical. These thinkers are logical, quantitative and technical.
- Practical. These thinkers are detail-oriented, organized and conservative.

- Relational. These thinkers are expressive and emotional. They like to engage with others.
- Experimental. These thinkers are more conceptual. They like to do things differently.

HR professionals also can help their organizations develop agile and inclusive leaders to foster diversity of thought, Herrmann-Nehdi said.

Learn to communicate with people who have different thinking preferences. If you don't know what the other person's thinking preference is, be prepared with several approaches, she said.

Redefine the diversity and inclusion program as a business enabler to get better buy-in, she advised.

"We know [diversity] helps, but sometimes leadership doesn't get it," she said. It also helps to apply for diversity awards to help the company look good, she said.

Focus on results. Make the argument that encouraging diversity of thought can help the organization utilize its full brain power.

To illustrate that point, she quoted former President Woodrow Wilson: "I not only use all the brains that I have, but all I can borrow."

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