

9 ways to embrace diversity of thought — and why you should

Tags: Addressing Unconscious Bias, Articles, Overcoming Unconscious Bias, Strategic Thinking

It feels good — and efficient! — to work with familiar people, speaking in shorthand and finding confidence-boosting consensus without the conflict that can come from disagreement.

Yet, research suggests that groups with diverse perspectives tend to be more effective at problem-solving and innovating, perhaps because people work harder to explain unique views and analyze new information than they do when surrounded by people with the same background or experiences. “Diversity jolts us into cognitive action in ways that homogeneity simply does not,” writes researcher Katherine W. Phillips.

And when you seek and embrace new perspectives, you not only help yourself but also foster the kind of workplace where people get excited to share their ideas, even if they challenge the status quo, because they know their contribution will be heard and valued.

So, how can you leverage thought diversity? For starters, try these tips.

1. Take advantage of brief encounters to start expanding your perspective.

Getting to know your colleagues as individuals with unique views to contribute is a powerful antidote to groupthink, bias, and the tendency to put on blinders to focus on your own work. Beginning to expand your perspective need not be time consuming; you can start small. Getting more familiar with someone in a casual, low-pressure setting can make it easier to hear them out later when they offer a provocative idea or piece of feedback that could impact your work

To benefit from a chance encounter with a colleague at the elevator or during a chat before a department meeting, try asking a simple question like *“What’s the most interesting thing you’re working on?”* or *“What’s your perspective on our company’s big initiative?”* Then listen and engage with the person.



“Do I have confirmation bias? Yes.
You bet. Absolutely.”

Whether or not you learn something that's immediately helpful, you're laying the foundation for a more productive relationship. And you're setting mental markers for how the other person could contribute to your work: For example, if Tariq is focused on expanding government contracts, he could be a helpful source of information on what product features clients value most.

2. Push your team to think critically, and hire for critical thinking skills and unique contributions.

Early in his career, experienced sales manager Shahan Mohideen noticed a pattern: His direct reports agreed with him “way too quickly and easily — which was scary, not comforting,” he says.

He devised a team session where one rep would pull up an account and the group would analyze it together, encouraging each person (even invited guests from other teams) to offer an insight or idea to bring fresh eyes to the account.

In addition, Mohideen changed the way he hired, looking specifically for candidates with different backgrounds who could add a new perspective. “The questions I began to ask were ‘What unique value will you bring to the team?’ and ‘How will you make those around you better?’ — not just ‘Can you hit a sales number?’” Over time, he began to see a real difference in team performance. “I’ve looked at the data, and the most successful team I’ve ever managed — in terms of pure sales revenue — was the most diverse team.”

3. When it comes to proactively seeking input on your work, challenge any natural assumptions that it won't be worth the effort.

I know what she's going to say and it won't change my mind, so asking will only waste time for both of us.

Your brain may fall back on common assumptions — that the other person's views remain fixed, that there's no feedback that will be helpful, or that the person is too busy to help — trying to dissuade you from reaching out for views that could differ from yours. Don't let these excuses become habit, or your work will remain untested and grow stagnant.

Think of the risks if you don't seek views that challenge your own: A blind spot of yours causes a project to flop or a campaign to offend a certain group of customers. Also consider the potential rewards of making the extra effort to seek others' views: A crisis averted or breakthrough revealed

In terms of whom to ask, be careful not to judge someone's capability or potential to contribute based on your occasional interactions or surface traits like job function or age, says experienced engineering manager Jim Wagoner. He once found surprising insight from a financial analyst who was decades younger than he but who had a knack for asking high-level, strategic engineering questions. "This person really expanded our technical team's view of what the project should be. From that point on, I started to look for people who had that kind of partnership attitude and could advance my thinking."

4. Identify times when proactively seeking a diverse perspective would be especially valuable for your goal or project.

Of course, it's neither realistic nor wise to pause 10 times during every project to hear new people's ideas and opinions. But alternative viewpoints can be especially helpful when:

- **Your group is homogeneous.** Have you all worked in the same roles or at the same company for years? Are you all women or all men? Of similar cultural or racial backgrounds? All engineers designing a consumer product or all marketing experts describing a product's functionality? Have you reached a comfortable consensus, maybe because you're on autopilot or don't see another way? These are strong signals that you could be missing an important perspective — whether you're just getting going on a project or in the final stages.
- **You're in the planning stages of just about any project.** It's easy to assume that what you see as a good approach is also good for everyone else in the company. But are your priorities aligned, or even right? Is your plan realistic, given how it needs to fit with what other teams are doing?
- **You want to do something new.** If you want to do something differently than you have before, it makes sense to consult different sources.

5. Ask for input on your work in a way that makes it likely you will get a helpful response.

Would it be better to present your ask in a group discussion, where people can build ideas off of one another, or in a 1-on-1 conversation, where you're more likely to get a candid interaction without the loudest voices dominating? Whichever you choose, alert people ahead of time, so they have a chance to think about it beforehand.

In terms of how you ask, make your request specific to increase the chances of a productive exchange. And make it clear that you want criticism — not just affirmation. For example:

Poor: *“What do you think of my report?”*

Better: *“I’m interested in feedback on my report, specifically how you think the tone would resonate with your clients. What’s missing here? What am I overlooking?”*

6. When you hear a view you disagree with, take time to consider it rather than attacking or dismissing it outright.

Few people will continue sharing with you if your first response is “That won’t work” or “That’s a dumb idea.” Our instant reactions are easily colored by overconfidence and unconsciously biased perceptions of others — *he’s inexperienced, she’s naive*, and so on.

Tactics like the following can help you adopt a mindset of curiosity and stay open to others’ views long enough to evaluate them objectively:

- **Write down the person’s views in your own words.** Summarizing in writing helps you separate the core points from any personal impressions you may have about the person and how he or she delivered the message. This tactic can be especially helpful if the person’s delivery was awkward, passionate, inarticulate, confrontational, or otherwise challenging.
- **Ask questions to zero in on the most important points.** If, despite your specific ask for input (see No. 5), the person’s feedback feels off base or diffuse, help the person isolate their good ideas by asking questions like *“Which problem would your approach solve?”* or *“What do you think is the single most important aspect of what you just shared?”*
- **Share the rationale behind your perspective as a way to open up the discussion.** Is it possible that your perspective and the other person’s aren’t as far apart as it seems? Share the priorities and context behind your approach, and encourage the other person to do the same.

7. Use a few structured criteria to evaluate the input you receive.

People are drawn to the way an idea is packaged as much as the idea’s actual merits. So, if Nayeon beats her sales quota, or sounds confident, or looks and acts like you, you may be inclined to accept any idea she shares (this is called the “halo effect”). Then there’s the inverse “horn effect” — if Renee can’t keep her schedule straight or her native language is different than yours,

you may mistakenly presume that she missed details or gave poor feedback on your proposal.

Establishing objective criteria to evaluate others' ideas helps you focus on what's important and ignore your brain's attempt to jump to conclusions. For example, you might ask yourself:

- What problem could this idea solve?
- If we implement the idea, what are the possible outcomes and the likelihood of each outcome?
- Have others tried this or something similar? What were their results?
- How doable or realistic is the idea, given your time and budget constraints?
- How does it fit with my or my team's skills and capacity?

8. Consider the broad range of actions you can take with this new information — beyond just accepting or dismissing it.

Maybe a contact in marketing shares customer insights that are so eye-popping they make you realize you need to completely shift your priorities. But information will rarely be so clear, leaving you debating whether and how to act on it.

In some cases, it makes sense to incorporate a small piece — maybe the customer insights from marketing don't radically change your project design, but do lead you to tweak your communications plan for it. If you decide to move forward in your original way, keep the new idea alive by documenting it in a “parking lot” file. Perhaps you can test the concept in conversations with others (“*Omar showed me a report suggesting that data privacy is our customers' number one concern — I'm curious to hear your take on that?*”). Hearing reactions from multiple sources may provide some clarity or new ideas you can use in the future.

Regardless of what you decide to do with the input someone shared, thank that person and share back: “*Thank you so much for changing my perspective*” or “*The input you gave me helped me revamp my communications plan*” or even “*I appreciate your taking the time to share. While I'm going to stay the course for this project, you've given me a lot to think about going forward.*” Sharing back shows that you value the other person's contribution and promotes a culture that supports the free sharing and debating of ideas.

9. Contribute your own divergent views — especially when you suspect they'll start a helpful conversation.

Your dissenting view could potentially draw out others who have been thinking the same thing but not saying so out of a lack of confidence, shyness, or a feeling that their views aren't welcome. The more you share divergent views (without going overboard), the more you'll help foster a culture where it's okay to seek out diverse viewpoints, disagree, and have a productive debate without unhealthy conflict.

With some trusted colleagues, an unvarnished "*I disagree!*" to any idea they share may be fine. But in most cases, you'll stand a better chance of stimulating discussion without being a nuisance if you reserve your dissent for when people most need to hear it — like in response to a strategy for reaching a goal rather than to a choice of team lunch location. Also, package your message in a less-confrontational way, using phrases that invite people to think more about the issue rather than putting them on the defensive.

For example, if you're looking at a new marketing piece:

Poor: "*Men will hate this!*"

Better: "How do you think this will appeal to our male customers?" or "I'm playing devil's advocate here: What about the male customers who might feel the imagery is not for them?"

Then listen carefully to others' responses to determine whether and how to constructively share further.

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