

What 'that dress debate' tells us about leadership

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Last week's popular debate on social media about whether 'that dress' was white/gold or blue/black highlighted how we can 'see' the same thing very differently.

We heard from colour experts and neuroscientists, and most of us learned something about how our brains process visual information.

But for me, the big lesson was how easily we assume that what we 'see' is reality.

'Everyone, it seems, had an opinion', said the *New York Times*, 'and everyone was convinced that he, or she, was right.'

I saw a white/gold dress, and I was initially surprised when my teenage son emphatically told me that it was blue/black – essentially insisting that *I* was wrong.

It feels uncomfortable to be challenged, especially when we feel so certain about what we 'see'.

As human beings, we naturally tend to seek out information that confirms our beliefs and to ignore conflicting evidence. Psychologists and cognitive scientists call this confirmation bias, and it is one form of unconscious bias that inhibits diversity in our workplaces.

Our brains like to take shortcuts, using the least mental effort necessary. Neuroscientists have shown that similarity is easier for our brains to deal with, while difference is harder. In effect, we are biased towards similarity, and away from diversity.

And that can get in the way of our decision-making and diversity progress as we try to create more inclusive, high-performing workplaces.

While the online world chattered last week about the dress, I heard a story from one of our client organisations. Their CEO routinely tells colleagues that 'you have an obligation to disagree with me'. It's a bold statement, and probably not too common in our workplaces.

Mostly, we gravitate towards 'people like us' and find it easier to make connections with those from similar backgrounds and with similar personalities.

Combine this with the effects of stereotyping about leadership – where men are more readily associated with key leadership traits of competence and assertiveness than women – and you can see why organisations dominated by Anglo male leaders of a certain age group can reflect limited diversity of thought.

But in the workplace there's a real risk to performance when groups of similar people don't disagree and don't challenge each other. Dr Jen Whelan, CEO of Psynapse Psychometrics, uses an online tool to measure individuals' unconscious preferences in thinking styles. A recent set of collective results from an executive leadership team showed a striking uniformity in thinking style, with the team operating, in effect, as an 'ideological echo-chamber'.

Dr Whelan points out that research shows diverse teams perform better because they think and problem-solve in more innovative ways, based on diverse knowledge and experience, and they communicate, debate, and question assumptions more effectively.

Leading with an inclusive mindset separates a great manager from a mediocre one, according to Catalyst's latest study, *'Inclusive Leadership: the view from six countries'* (including Australia). The study says that inclusive leaders encourage team members to solve problems, come up with new ideas, and learn from criticism and different points of view.

In our work with large organisations in Australia and New Zealand, and in our research, we've learned about some inspiring inclusive practices.

- Giving the team explicit permission to disagree with the leader is one important way to generate diversity of thought. Some leaders deliberately appoint a 'devil's advocate' in meetings to normalise challenge and diversity of thought.
- Leaders have told us that they've recognised some of their own (unconscious) biases and are now taking steps to overcome them – for example, by getting feedback from a range of peers before they make talent management decisions.
- Some leaders make a special effort to understand the experiences of people who were not part of their tight-knit 'in-group' and who were feeling (unintentionally) excluded from some key decisions. Simple things like where you hold meetings, who is invited to meetings, and what type of social gatherings you hold, can all be changed to include more people and make them feel genuinely welcome.
- Inviting team members to share their views before you provide yours is a leadership tactic to avoid 'priming' or 'framing' bias – when we unconsciously 'plant' ideas. Cass R. Sunstein and Reid Hastie recently wrote an article in the *Harvard Business Review* about the science of group decision-making, and said 'leaders can refuse to take a firm position at the outset, thus making space for more information to emerge'.
- Sunstein and Hastie also said it is vital to hear from people who are 'cognitively peripheral' – who have information that is not generally known – rather than

having discussions disproportionately influenced by people who are ‘cognitively central’ – who have knowledge that is shared by many members of the group. Or, as one global organisation advises its leaders, every group needs to ‘hear from the quietest person in the room’.

This is not just about making the workplace more inclusive. It’s about better performance. ‘Inclusive leaders show confidence in team members by holding them responsible for aspects of their performance that are within their control,’ says the Catalyst research. ‘They stand up for what they believe is right, even when it means taking a risk.’

Accountability, like inclusiveness, depends on everyone speaking openly. When considering issues much more important than dress colour, the team performs strongest when everyone genuinely feels they can see what they see, and say what they see, not be limited by what they think they should see.

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