



## EFL “Brieflet”: Engaging with Diversity

Our unconscious biases are influenced by both our historical and current social contexts. **Engaging with Diversity** in the workplace is about actively noticing and being prepared to respond constructively to human differences. It “*encompasses acceptance and respect ... understanding that each individual is unique along [multiple] dimensions. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive and nurturing environment ... moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual*” ([ASUO, University of Oregon](#)).

Raising, hearing or learning about the topic of diversity can feel challenging, interesting, threatening, exciting, monotonous, inspiring ... Our reactions reflect our own diversity. Technology, globalisation and international responsibilities have created greater urgency both to understand and represent our differences. The opportunities for organisations to enrich their perspective, widen their audience and sustain their longevity are considerable. Indeed diversity can often lead to more innovation ([Clutterbuck, 2007](#)). How we respond impacts our future.

*“It is not the strongest or most intelligent that survive, it is the most adaptable to change”.* [Charles Darwin \(1809 - 1882\)](#)

**Engaging with Diversity** is multi-layered. Rather than attempt to categorise, or pre-determine someone’s behaviour solely by what we see, it is more helpful to discover the different meanings or values we give across various, non-exclusive, dimensions<sup>1</sup>:

1. Standing - how do we relate to organisational, community, or social position?
2. Individual compared with Collective - how are these prioritised?
3. Gender/Age/Capability - what value do we give to these characteristics?
4. Uncertainty, Ambiguity, Change Orientation - how/how far are these tolerated?
5. Time Orientation & Prioritisation - are we focused upon the past, present or future? How is time managed?
6. Rules, Rituals, Relationships - how do these influence our interactions; how are conflict, rewards, punishment, support ... managed?
7. Expression - the degree of emotional emphasis; implicit vs explicit language
8. Focus - single or multiple tasks, especially in relation to technology?
9. Attribution of Control - self- or other-directed; how is help sought?

Within these dimensions, we have the opportunity to explore the values of those with whom we live and work. For leaders who are genuine in their regard for mutual learning, the [Tuakana-Teina](#) concept, developed from within the Maori worldview, is eloquent. It acknowledges the possibility, and responsibility, for reciprocity (*ako*) in the unequal relationship between an older (*tuakana*) and younger (*teina*) sibling. Similarly, in other relationships of uneven power, the expectation is that the more experienced *tuakana* learns as much from their *teina* as they teach them.

<sup>1</sup> NB. Strongly influenced by Hofstede (2003); and Trompenaars & Hampden (1997).

*Ka ora pea ki a koe, ka ora koe i au*  
*Perhaps I survive because of you and you survive because of me*  
(Maori whakatauki/proverb)

Rosinski provides some simple steps to **Engaging with Diversity**:

1. Recognise and Accept Difference - acceptance doesn't mean agreement or surrender: open your mind
2. Adapt to Difference - empathising doesn't mean adoption or assimilation: move outside your comfort zone temporarily and try a different environment
3. Integrate Difference - be informed by different perspectives, use them to ground you: remain balanced within the new possibilities
4. Leverage Difference - make the most of the differences, strive for synergy: achieve unity through diversity by proactively seeking the gems

Consider the impact of the subtle dimensions of diversity within organisational contexts. To what extent does the physical environment encourage the voice of all? For instance, is the artwork relevant to the working, and other stakeholder, community; do the furnishings, acoustics and visual displays engage those with different capabilities; how are the organisational purpose and vision communicated?

Tulpa & Bresser advocate using Appreciative Inquiry to discover when staff work, or have worked, at their best, how they like to be acknowledged, what's important to them. With challenging precision, Kiwi comedian, Philip Patston provides a vision on YouTube of how our desire to label might improve with "Decay" - check it out!

*You don't get harmony if everyone sings the same note*

Doug Floyd

#### Sources for your further interest

Clutterbuck, D. (2007). *Coaching the team at work*. Nicholas Brealey: London.

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