

You Are So Different to Me!

Have you ever done the “I see red” activity? Look for and silently name all the items in the room that are red. Now close your eyes and recall all the blue items. If you have gone blank, or at least had some difficulty in doing that, don’t worry, you are normal! When the mind has been oriented to focus on something specific it is very difficult to disentangle and see another perspective.

Some people are pessimists and overwhelmingly see the negative or the threat in a situation. That can be highly beneficial if you are a risk manager. The optimists see the positive in any situation. Both struggle to understand the perspective voiced from the other end of the continuum. Examples of other continuums include introversion/extroversion, thinking/feeling, judging/perceiving, sensing/intuiting and orientations to big picture/detail, certainty/uncertainty, action/fact gathering etc. And then there are those beliefs, values and perceptions we have adopted from childhood, tribal, cultural, social, economic, political and other influences and experiences.

Author

[Stephen Harrison](#) BSc (Hons), PMP, FPMINZ

Abstract

Differences between people leads to conflict. However, not all conflict is bad. Recognising difference and focussing on ‘the problem at hand’ can lead to productive and constructive outcomes.

Keywords

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A team with some unmanaged differences

There are a myriad factors that combine to create the way you are and the way I am.

Collectively they shape our perceptions of the world, our attitudes and expectations, and obscure other perceptions to some degree. Whatever we have learned to see, from all these factors, is what we see as we live and experience life. Most of these influences are invisible to us, and yet they powerfully steer us in terms of who we are drawn to or repulsed by, what we believe is possible, who we trust and how much, how we deal with ambiguity and change, and our capacity to work with others. These same influences also shape groups of people, teams, organisations, countries etc.

It is almost surprising, given all this, that we ever find any common ground. Fortunately, in any given situation, only a small portion of these influences show up. When we start to feel a rubbing, a developing hot spot, or

blatant conflict, there is something arising that is causing a difference of opinion. Whether in relationship with another person, or within a team or organisational context, the results you achieve will depend on how you handle those points of friction.

When the friction relates to what is being worked on, harnessing differences of opinion can be extremely valuable, even if some find that quite frustrating. If the friction arises from judgement and criticism of another person, then it is damaging and detrimental. Recognising our biases with respect to others and finding a way to navigate these respectfully enables rich and fertile material that will aid the quality of your thinking processes. This is often a good time to engage a team coach who is not embroiled in the work activity. The team coach can draw attention to and strengthen the group process and help your team unleash its full potency.