





Diversity's new frontier

Diversity of thought and the future of the workforce



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Executive summary

P to now, diversity initiatives have focused primarily on fairness for legally protected populations. But organizations now have an opportunity to harness a more powerful and nuanced kind of diversity: diversity of thought. Advances in neurological research that are untangling how each of us thinks and solves problems can help organizations, including governments, operationalize diversity of thought and eventually change how they define and harness human capital.

Diversity of thought can bring an organization the following benefits:

- 1. It helps guard against groupthink and expert overconfidence. Diversity of thought can help organizations make better decisions and complete tasks more successfully because it triggers more careful and creative information processing than typically occurs in homogeneous groups.
- 2. It helps increase the scale of new insights. Generating a great idea quickly often requires connecting multiple tasks and ideas together in a new way. Technological advances are enabling new ways, such as crowdsourcing and gamification, to bring the diversity of human thinking to bear on challenging problems.
- 3. It helps organizations identify the right employees who can best tackle their most pressing problems.
 Advances in neuroscience mean that matching people to specific jobs based

on more rigorous cognitive analysis is within reach. Organizations that can operationalize faster ideation can begin to purposely align individuals to certain teams and jobs simply because of the way they think.

To increase diversity of thought among their workforce, governments can:

- 1. Hire differently. The job description and interview process should contain competencies and questions designed to help identify and select a cognitively diverse organization. Organizations also need to recruit top talent—even if it means shaking up the status quo with opinionated employees.
- 2. Manage differently. Instead of seeking consensus as an end goal, managers should encourage task-focused conflict that can push their teams to new levels of creativity and productivity. The aim is to foster an environment where all feel comfortable sharing their views and their authentic selves.
- 3. Promote differently. One way government organizations can retain and advance cognitively diverse talent is to enact sponsorship programs directed at individuals who represent different thinking styles. Moving to a team-based performance evaluation framework can allow an organization to create and foster a culture of inclusion that empowers its people, spurs collaboration, and inspires more innovation.

A more nuanced approach to diversity

T'S time to rethink diversity. Up to now, diversity initiatives focused primarily on fairness for legally protected populations—historically underrepresented in the American workforce.¹ Today we are living through the demographic transformation of the US labor market, which will make ethnic diversity a permanent fixture of the future workplace.² This demographic reality provides the opportunity to reexamine diversity policies and ask what workplace diversity really should mean in the 21st century.

Of course, the growing natural diversity of the American workforce does not mean that the representation of historically underrepresented individuals will equalize throughout all levels of an organization. For example, diversity programs will still need to focus on promoting participation of women and ethnic minorities at executive levels in organizations. The shifting demographics do provide government leaders, however, with the opportunity to refresh the business case for diversity and take advantages of significant advances in how to think about the optimum

level of diversity in the workplace. Smart organizations will realize that they now have an opportunity to introduce more powerful and nuanced approaches to operationalize the

full range of human diversity: Namely, they can begin to harness diversity of thought.³

Diversity of thought is the next frontier. Diversity of thought refers to a concept that all of us know intuitively and experience throughout our lives. Each human being has a unique blend of identities, cultures, and experiences that inform how he or she thinks, interprets, negotiates, and accomplishes a task. Diversity of thought goes beyond the affirmation of

equality—simply recognizing differences and responding to them. Instead, the focus is on realizing the full potential of people, and in turn the organization, by acknowledging and appreciating the potential promise of each person's unique perspective and different way of thinking. The implication of this new frontier in diversity is that leaders and organizations must let go of the idea that there is "one right way" and instead focus on creating a learning culture where people feel accepted, are comfortable contributing ideas, and actively seek to learn from each other.4

What is new today and is only likely to grow in the

next few years are the unprecedented advances in neurological research that are untangling how each of us thinks and solves problems. These insights can help organizations operationalize diversity of thought and can eventually change how they define and harness human capital.

In the not-too-distant future, managers adept at leading a diverse work team will be sensitive not only to factors of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability, but also to the new research and enabling technologies that will help organizations understand how people think. Managers will also need to understand how to use emergent technologies to help employees evaluate their unique thinking strengths and identify their optimum contributions to the mission. Technology, of course, is not a panacea. Leaders will also need to learn how to adjust their management styles and tactics to better encourage the connections between individuals and their ideas to improve problem solving, learning, cooperation, and innovation in their organizations. Leaders and managers will thus face the need to take increasing ownership of creating an inclusive culture.

Hiring practices will also need to evolve to ensure organizations have the necessary diversity of thought in their workforce. Hiring for a diversity of backgrounds may not necessarily yield different perspectives, as physical diversity is not a sufficient proxy for diversity of thought. And once an individual is hired, organizations will need to adjust their approaches to managing and advancing the individual's career.

This report describes the benefits diversity of thought can bring to an organization, and also shows examples of how organizations can apply diversity of thought to transform the way they recruit and retain a diverse and inclusive workforce. We discuss:

- Benefits of diversity of thought to organizations
 - Helps guard against groupthink and expert overconfidence
 - 2. Increases the scale of new insights
 - 3. Helps organizations identify the right employees who can best tackle their most pressing problems
- What you can do today to increase diversity of thought
 - 1. Hire differently
 - 2. Manage differently
 - 3. Promote differently

Benefits of diversity of thought to organizations

VER the last 10 years, cognitive scientists and neurologists have made progress in understanding how the mind works. For example, many of us—even those who aren't scientists—are familiar with the distinction between left- and right-brained thinking and its impact on work performance.⁵ Although this taxonomy is overly simplistic, neurological research does show that individuals have differing cognitive styles. Tests show that most individuals have particular thinking strengths: Some are inclined to be better at math, others at pattern recognition or creativity.

Experts agree that this research has identified a significant new aspect of diversity that existing diversity policies do not adequately address. We have long understood that legacy diversity and experiential diversity (see sidebar, "Three kinds of diversity") illuminate how people will likely behave in various circumstances.6 Thought diversity offers a new layer of insight that organizations can use to maximize the collective potential of their employees. Leaders that explore this new frontier of diversity can blend the cacophony of ideas in their workplace to spark innovation and creativity. Even the slightest nuance of one worker's thinking, if appropriately harnessed, could bring value to the organization.

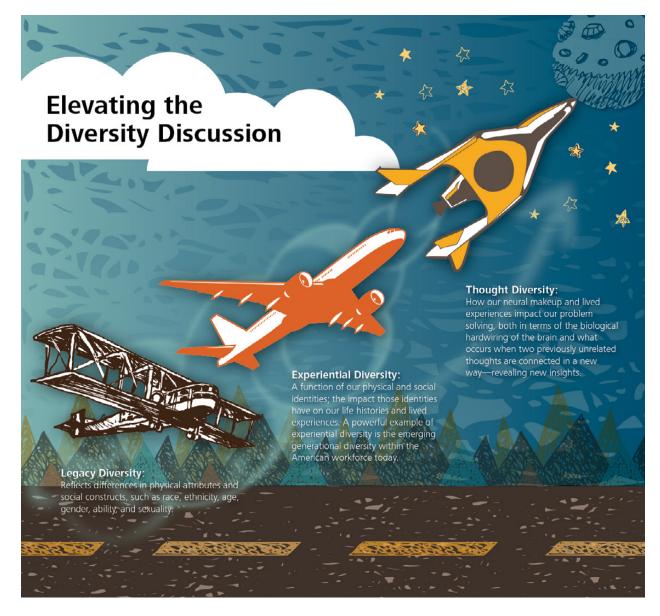
The confluence of science, technology, and management theory regarding human thought is opening up an opportunity for government agencies and other organizations that are willing to embrace diversity of thought as an organizational priority. Investing in diversity of thought can help organizations notice three key benefits and a significant competitive advantage.

1. Diverse thinkers help guard against groupthink and expert overconfidence

Research demonstrates that thought diversity can help organizations make better decisions because it triggers more creative information processing, often absent in homogenous groups. Moreover, while homogenous groups are typically more confident in their performance, diverse groups are oftentimes more successful in completing tasks. This is because diverse team members don't just introduce new viewpoints; they also trigger more careful information processing that is typically absent in homogenous groups.8 Some of the most groundbreaking research in this area is being conducted by the government, specifically by the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA). IARPA's Aggregative Contingent Estimation (ACE) program aims "to dramatically enhance the accuracy, precision, and timeliness of forecasts for a broad range of event types, through the development of advanced techniques that elicit, weight, and combine the judgments of many intelligence analysts."

Philip Tetlock, a professor of management and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, leads an ACE program research team. Tetlock, whose book *Expert Political Judgment* examined the frequent overconfidence of substantive experts, has assembled a group of laypeople with diverse backgrounds to predict the future likelihood of certain events. This eclectic ACE team has replicated the results Tetlock first published in his book by handily beating the recognized experts in

Figure 1. Elevating the diversity discussion



their ability to forecast future events. Both the studies in ACE and in Tetlock's original research illustrate the potential that organizations have to "fully understand the causes of successful collective performance and to improve their outcomes by assembling teams of more diverse thinkers to complement their more traditional experts." ¹⁰

Robert Epstein, in *Psychology Today*, further notes that organizations that employ

thought diversity increase the opportunity for innovation and mitigate the risk of groupthink.
¹¹ Without a commitment to thought diversity, employees generally are not willing to share their ideas and solutions. To that end, *Willfully Blind* author and CEO Margaret Heffernan writes: "[I]n this context, diversity isn't a form of political correctness, but an insurance policy against internally generated blindness that leaves institutions exposed and out of touch."
¹²

2. Diverse thinkers help increase the scale of new insights

When time is of the essence, organizations often resort to gathering a group of experts and specialists, the premise being that subject-matter knowledge and skills are more likely to quickly generate a quality solution to whatever issue faces the organization. However, emerging technologies are creating options rendering the congregation of experts less useful.¹³ Instead, generating a great idea quickly requires the ability to connect multiple tasks and ideas together in a new way.¹⁴

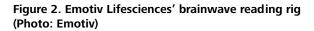
Crowdsourcing and gamification techniques are unique ways to channel the diversity of human thinking through their use of diverse online crowds to solve challenging issues. The crowdsourcing game Foldit, sponsored by the University of Washington's Departments of Computer Science and Engineering and Biochemistry, uses the puzzle-solving intuitions of volunteer gamers to help scientists better understand the function of human protein enzymes.¹⁵ In one puzzle, scientists asked the community to remodel one of four amino acid loops on a particular enzyme. They received over 70,000 design submissions, the top five of which came from players who had not taken any science beyond high school chemistry. What the players did have in common were spatial reasoning skills, intuition, agility, collaboration, self-organization, and competition.16 These skills, when multiplied by the number of players in Foldit, quickly pointed the scientists to a solution that would have taken the recognized experts much longer to complete. Stephen Lutz, a researcher at Emory University, says: "Using the Foldit players allows the researchers to use human intuition at a scale that is unprecedented."17 Though most organizations cannot give all their problems to the "crowd" to solve, they can promote a broader range of thinking in the workplace to help them achieve the same benefits of speed and scale afforded by crowdsourcing techniques.

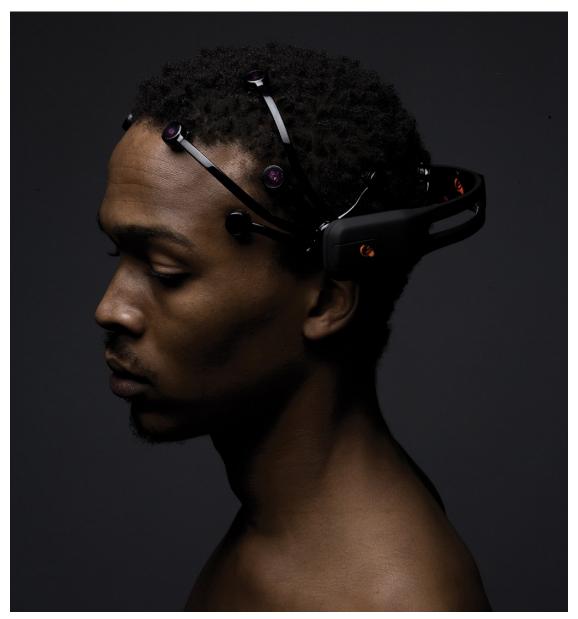
Temple Grandin, a noted doctor of animal science and autism advocate, argues that Silicon Valley is a breeding ground for innovative products and ideas, and is powered by different types of thinking. She has recently, and somewhat notoriously, claimed that half of the innovators in Silicon Valley have Asperger's syndrome, citing that the ability to program for long hours of time could be indicative of a person who is on the autism spectrum. "To create something like Google, people had to sit still for hundreds of hours to learn how to program . . . It's ironic that the thing that they text on has to be made by someone who is not distracted and is looking at information in whole bits for long periods of time."18

3. Diverse thinkers help organizations identify individuals who can best tackle their most pressing problems

Organizations that can operationalize faster ideation can begin to purposely align individuals to certain teams and jobs simply because of the way they think. Some of this can already be accomplished with testing, but advances in neuroscience mean that matching people to specific jobs based on more rigorous cognitive analysis is within reach. Emotiv Lifesciences, a neurobiology company, has created a brainwave reading rig designed to measure how well a person can concentrate on a given activity. Using sensors similar to an EEG machine, Emotiv has found a way to connect cognitive mental activity and the control of a device like a computer, offering real-time analysis of cognitive activity.¹⁹ These and other techniques being developed reveal not just the symphony of neural activity, but the notes behind it.

Today, matching cognitive talents to the particular demands of a job or mission is largely done by trial and error. Until recently, the closest organizations could get to understanding the hardwiring of people's thoughts, and predict their success in any given job, was





to give them a personality test. These tests, including Myers-Briggs, Enneagrams, and others, introduced the concept that people may react differently in a given work environment. As new technologies reveal individual strengths more quickly and more precisely, organizations will be able to match more people with the tasks they can do best.

The applications and acceptance of these new technologies can be challenging and will likely take organizations into uncharted

territories. But if properly incorporated into work processes, they can help identify individuals who can best tackle an organization's most pressing problems. These new capabilities will empower organizations not to read minds, but to understand how a mind might react and how best to match it with others to achieve mission success. Organizations that learn to do this well will likely have an immediate competitive advantage.

What you can do today to increase diversity of thought

THE intersections between neuroscience, psychology, and technology are creating new opportunities for organizations to better understand how people think and how to translate these cutting-edge findings into practice. Armed with this additional information, government agencies can better align different blends of employees to a particular challenge and unleash diversity of thought within their organization to achieve mission success.

What follows are three steps government agencies can take to begin developing a strategy to foster diversity of thought.

1. Hire differently

Find strategic skill gaps

Governments can realize the benefits of diversity of thought today by evolving their hiring practices. In *The Difference*, Scott Page, an economist at the University of Michigan, illustrates a unique way to hire people with an eye toward maximizing the diversity of thought within an organization. In the study, three candidates interviewed for two vacant

positions on a research team. All candidates were asked the same 10 questions. Jeff correctly answered 7 of 10, Rose 6 of 10, and Spencer 5 of 10 (figure 3).

Many organizations would have hired Jeff and Rose for two reasons. First, these two candidates garnered the highest cumulative score. Second, HR managers tend to hire candidates like Jeff and Rose because they "spend a lot of time and money making sure that their people all think the same. They're squadrons, flying in tight formations, valuing consistency and efficiency over individual flair."20 However, Page reveals an important nuance. If a recruiter spends the time to examine what questions each candidate answered correctly, he or she will notice that the lowest overall scorer (Spencer) correctly answered every question that the highest scorer (Jeff) incorrectly answered. As such, Spencer presumably brings a different way of thinking to the organization.21

With an eye for diversity of thought, managers and HR representatives can select people who think differently while still maintaining

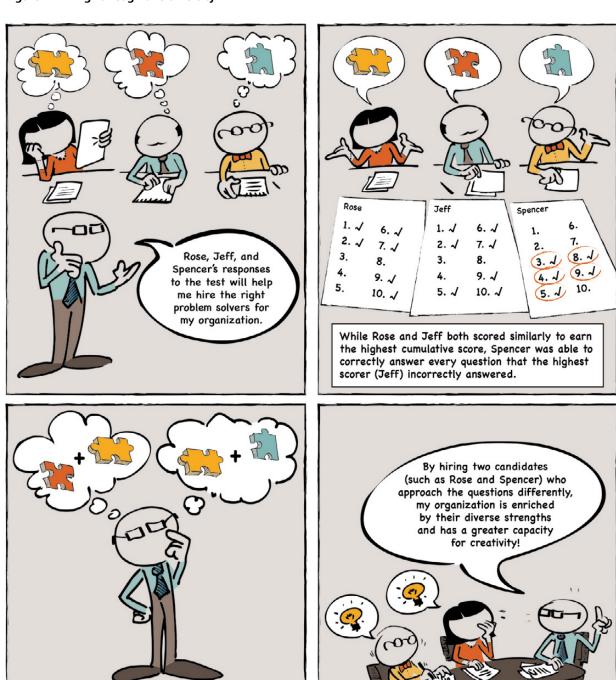
Figure 3. Job candidate test results

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q 7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Spencer			Х	Х	X			X	Х	
Jeff	Х	Х			Х	Х	Х		Х	Х
Rose	Х	Х				Х	Х		Х	Х

Figure 4. Hiring for cognitive diversity

Hiring managers and recruiters have two options: To hire candidates (like Jeff and Rose) who think similarly, thus offering consistency and efficiency, or to consider different combinations that value

"individual flair."



alignment with the mission and bottom line. To get a diverse pool of applicants, recruiters will need to examine their practices to ensure not only that a job description includes the technical competencies necessary for success in the job, but also that the job description or interview process contains competencies and questions designed to help identify and select a cognitively diverse organization that can continually evolve.

A German software firm is taking this idea of selecting for cognitive diversity a step further by actively recruiting for a particular strand of cognitive ability that has historically been branded a disability. SAP AG recently announced its plans to recruit people with autism to make use of this population's ability to process information. People diagnosed with autism have difficulties communicating and suffer from emotional detachment, yet those with mild autism diagnoses often can perform complex tasks that require high levels of concentration—typically much better than the average population. Beyond their advanced mathematical skills, autistic people also frequently exhibit a particularly potent ability to find patterns and make connections. SAP AG's willingness to seek out unique cognitive skill sets where other organizations may see prohibitive deficits injects new complexity into their talent management, but can be well worth the effort.²² SAP AG noted that "SAP sees a potential competitive advantage to leveraging the unique talents of people with autism, while also helping them to secure meaningful employment."23

Get away from the status quo and hire with debate in mind

One of the most important projects in US history benefited from a similar unorthodox approach to assembling a team. During World War II, the Manhattan Project was led by Colonel Dick Groves (US Army) and physicist Dr. Robert Oppenheimer. It was, first and foremost, a military operation, and would come to represent the beginning of

the military-industrial complex—a hybrid of public, private, and academic brain power.24 Groves and Oppenheimer brought together several thousand physicists and engineers, 20 of whom were Nobel laureates.²⁵ Oppenheimer, in particular, summoned scientists with contrasting theoretical points of view, knowing that if these men could collectively work through their differences, they would be able to accomplish one of the greatest scientific feats of the 20th century.26 Had they not hired with this in mind, the opportunity to generate and take advantage of innovative ideas may have been squandered. Although Groves and Oppenheimer did not open the floodgates to all types of diversity (women, for example, were not included), they did hire widely within the field of science and the military to combine two distinct worlds in a moment of crisis, creating a weapon of intense power, but setting the precedent for how diverse talents can achieve difficult tasks in a short period of time.

A key lesson from history is that organizations need to recruit top talent—even if it means shaking up the status quo with opinionated employees. Oppenheimer intentionally gathered dissenting, great minds in an effort to harness their conflicts. He knew that the series of solutions they worked toward would never have sprung forth from a chorus of agreement, no matter how collectively brilliant. Oppenheimer's true genius was in his ability to gather and manage talent. These principles could work for many more organizations whose cognitively diverse workforces need to engage constructively to test their differences of opinion.

2. Manage differently

Facilitate diversity tension

One of Oppenheimer's management strengths with the Manhattan Project was being comfortable with the uncomfortable. In their book *Virtuoso Teams*, Andrew Boynton and Bill Fischer, professors and experts in business management, observed: "The endless

struggle between idea flow and organizational complexity is a leitmotif that runs through the Manhattan Project story. Clearly the need for more ideas was in direct contradiction to the need for project secrecy. In addition, there was the question of how to generate novel ideas when so many true and opinionated experts were part of the team."27 Oppenheimer created an environment where all the scientists could come together and debate their various ideas during weekly meetings; even the ethical implications of the Manhattan Project were a topic of discussion.²⁸ It was no easy feat leading these differing points of view, which often resulted in what today is referred to as diversity tension.

One of the challenges associated with diversity is that it introduces greater complexity. The successful organizations will be the ones that can overcome challenges such as misunderstandings and increased conflict, which can happen when diversity is not successfully managed.

Even the best-intentioned manager can send off subconscious signals

of discomfort when confronted with diversity tension on their team. A research team in Denmark recently studied city government officials to identify reasons why their organization experienced high levels of negativity. They observed the local government officials, using videos to record typical actions and interactions during the workday. When looking back through the tapes, the researchers noticed that whenever a government executive was challenged or asked a tough question by his or her employees, he or she would make a slight variation in their head movement. Working with psychologists, the researchers determined that this slight head nod was the same tic observed

in nature when an individual comes into contact with a wild animal, namely a tiger.29

The office may not have a pet tiger, but managers and employees still face the instinctual urge to avoid conflict. It is simply easier for them to agree than to be confrontational. Part of being comfortable with conflict is abandoning the idea that consensus is an end in and of itself. In a well-run diverse team, substantive disagreements do not need to become personal—ideas either have merit and points of connection or they do not. Diversity of thought challenges managers to rethink conflict itself, shifting their perspective away from mitigating conflict's negative effects and toward designing conflict that can push their teams to new

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levels of creativity and productivity. Leaders and managers who create the necessary space for disagreements will find richer solutions and the buy-in of naysayers who are at least able to voice

IDEO, an industrial design firm, manages this tension by purposely

hiring people from diverse backgrounds.³⁰ The company hires to inject different perspectives and then fosters a collaborative and participative culture where people have to advocate for their ideas. IDEO's approach is born out of careful hiring practices and ability to facilitate controlled conflict, the subject of IDEO general manager Tom Kelly's book The Ten Faces of Innovation. Since these non-traditional teams are formed with experiential conflict in mind, individuals are required to be advocates for their ideas and respect the ideas of those around them. Furthermore, IDEO has a resourcing approach that gets people with great facilitation skills, not years of service, to drive

their ideas.

the design process and manage the project to get the most value of the unique experts. Kelly insists that while there is no formula for who should contribute when, the key is for all people to be encouraged to bring multiple ideas to a problem set. They also should not have competing ideologies (like the many scientists and military men of the Manhattan project); rather, they should have unique subject-matter expertise that, when brought together, sparks innovation.

Give permission

Government agencies aiming for a more diverse workforce need to adopt specific practices so that employees believe they have permission to bring their entire selves to the workplace.³¹ In that sense, organizations that strive for inclusion attempt to appreciate their employees' differences and foster an environment where all feel comfortable sharing their views and their authentic selves. Employees should feel comfortable disagreeing and holding opinions different from those of management. One of the hardest things for managers to do is to let employees disagree with them and to allow them to explore their ideas—even if that exploration leads to failure.

To relieve the pressure on employees, managers can use behavioral nudges to prompt conversation and depersonalize debate around even the manager's own personal ideas.32 In a recent interview, a manager in an intelligence agency described how she often has to write long analyses bringing together various pieces of literature into a seamless document. The documents contain content that is of the utmost strategic importance. One way she has found to ensure that her team members provide honest and necessary insight is to give them the permission to give harsh, constructive feedback. Instead of asking reviewers, "Does this make sense?" or "Is this OK?," she instead asks, "What is wrong with my logic?" or "What points am I missing?" Such questions provoke more contrarian analysis that ultimately helps her create a better final product.³³

Employees often complain that managers today stifle important conversations. Such difficult discussions will only increase as organizations begin to design work teams to capitalize on diversity of thought. Organizations need to make it a priority to equip their managers with new techniques to effectively manage and embrace diversity of thought.

3. Advance differently

Drive career sponsorship

Once cognitively diverse individuals are hired within a workplace, managers and leaders will want to retain and advance that talent. One way government organizations can do so is to enact sponsorship programs directed at individuals who represent different thinking styles. As human beings we are naturally inclined to associate with "like" people, yet a thought-diverse workforce needs to connect across thinking styles.34 Aligning sponsors based on shared attributes may not be the best way to help diverse individuals learn how to communicate their oppositional ideas in the most constructive fashion. Sponsors could help cognitively diverse thinkers find the appropriate application of their unique thinking styles, thus helping them to advance in their new career track.

A sponsor trained in the tenets of cognitive diversity would also be able to translate and promote the otherwise hidden attributes of individuals new to an organization. For example, military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have skills, certifications, and cognitive styles that organizations can use, including the ability to think quickly, manage well under pressure, and improvise. And yet their careers can be rocky when they are asked to adjust to a culture different from the military tribe they're used to.³⁵ Sponsors that can facilitate these types of transitions are

key to an organization's ability to incorporate cognitive diversity.

Individuals with diverse thinking styles can also act as a mentor to other people within their organizations. For example, in today's digital age, many Millennials are reverse mentoring more senior colleagues in social media and networks.36 Cisco has implemented a reverse mentorship program designed to "understand where the mentor can provide the executive with a perspective on how comments and decisions might be interpreted by diverse employees as well as valuable feedback on how well s/he encourages inclusion and diversity in his/her own team and also in his/her own business practices."37 Reverse mentorship programs tell employees that their different ideas are valued and, in fact, need to be incorporated more often in the more senior levels of the organization. The confidence individuals gain in reverse mentorship programs can help them achieve more in their official duties as well.

Shift to team-based evaluation

To the extent that diversity of thought is about identifying and managing potential, it is helpful to recall what the late Peter Drucker, management consultant, educator, and author said: "You can only manage what you can measure." Leaders willing to harness the power of thought diversity may want to measure

behaviors such as openness to constructive conflict to push their teams toward more robust results, however much this practice may challenge existing management norms. It's time to shift the conversation from managing individual performance to nurturing the collective, authentic team.

The US Office of Personnel Management has provided team evaluation guidance that highlights that individual performance can be linked to a team's cooperative behavior.³⁹ By focusing on the team's outputs, public sector organizations can continue to drive toward results while holding the collective accountable to attributes such as motivation, intellectual breadth, emotional intelligence, and risk tolerance. Critically, these elements are aligned with the larger goals and values of the organization and can help create an environment where people can bring their authentic selves. Any evaluation framework must reflect the complexities that make up the authentic self, and by pivoting evaluations toward the team, the appraisal becomes about shared performance and how each individual can enable the larger group to drive toward excellence. By moving to a team evaluation framework, organizations can create and foster a culture of inclusion that empowers its people, spurs collaboration, and inspires more innovation.

Harnessing diversity of thought

•HROUGHOUT the course of history, many great ideas would not have emerged without the right combination of technology, necessity, and opportunity. Diversity of thought is not a novel or radical idea, but rather the inevitable result of increased pluralism and connectivity in the 21st century. In ways that a few decades ago were unimaginable, people and organizations can now optimize the opportunities found in the intersections among cultures, values, and perspectives. The practices and regulations of today need to be reimagined and rewritten to allow for the emergence and full development of a more powerful diversity strategy. As MIT research scientist Andrew McAfee writes, "Expertise—for problem solving, innovation, etc.—is emergent. It's out there in large quantities, and in hard-to-predict places. A problem-solving approach that lets pockets of enthusiasm and expertise manifest themselves and find each other can yield

surprisingly large rewards, even in the unlikeliest places."⁴⁰ Diversity policies designed to hire, facilitate, and encourage diversity of thought can help organizations find that expertise.

But not all will rest on management. As tools and techniques emerge to allow individuals to explore their own personal cognitive makeup, job seekers could very well begin judging potential employers in the public and private sectors based on their ability to provide a good cognitive fit. Employees may develop the self-awareness to understand their own unique ability to contribute to an organization's mission and to maximize the expression of their own talents and passions. Government agencies that fail to manage for cognitive diversity eventually may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage in the future as the best talent will seek situations that can fully leverage their cognitive capabilities.

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