Embracing Diversity With a Growth Mindset

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Getting along with others is about more than just having things in common.

When it comes to falling in love, people – broadly speaking – tend to fit into one of two categories. Those in the first category think the best relationships are formed quickly, spontaneously and organically. Fireworks and instant chemistry are par for the course, while trying to "make it work" is a sure sign that the relationship perhaps isn't meant to be.

Individuals in the second category place less of an emphasis on natural compatibility and reject the notion that it's only true love if you don't need to work for it. They think of relationships as muscles that can grow and stretch with the right recipe of effort, care and compromise. Even if two people don't click immediately, they can cultivate a bond by setting differences aside, attending to mutual needs and committing to each other.

Those in the former group are likely to have a fixed mindset when building relationships, where the basis of compatibility is natural chemistry or whether you click effortlessly. Meanwhile, those in the latter group often

have a growth mindset and believe that compatibility can be nurtured over time. And while neither approach is necessarily better than the other, possessing a fixed mindset can hold people back from interacting with those who are different.

Extending these concepts to the workplace, our research with co-authors Soomin Cho and Paul Ingram investigates how differences in people's beliefs in the nature of relationships – what we call lay theories – affect how they foster connections with dissimilar individuals in a professional environment. This has crucial implications for diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Interactions in diverse teams

Workplace interactions often require people to establish relationships with others from diverse backgrounds. These differences can be surface-level or demographic qualities – such as race and age – as well as deep-seated, dispositional attributes including values, attitudes and psychological traits. Although it's vital to get along with people who look different, it's perhaps more challenging to achieve compatibility with those who think differently. Indeed, the full benefits of building cross-cutting ties across demographic boundaries can be curtailed if employees continue to favour those with similar deep-level attributes.

A core theme across research on workplace diversity is that interpersonal similarity promotes mutual trust, identification and satisfaction, while dissimilarity breeds dislike, distrust and conflict. But are some individuals more likely to choose to get along with those who are unlike themselves? And can people learn how to respect and appreciate interpersonal dispositional differences? These questions have important ramifications for building diverse but cohesive workplaces.

Our study investigates how holding either a fixed or growth theory affects similarity-attraction (or homophily – a tendency to value or prefer self-similar others) in a professional setting. We hypothesised that those with a fixed theory would be more likely than those with a growth theory to avoid interactions with individuals who were dispositionally dissimilar, that is, interpersonal similarity matters more to fixed theorists than growth theorists.

How do mindsets affect relationship building?

To test our hypotheses, we designed a field study involving students in an executive MBA programme. Before the semester began, they filled out a Lay Theories of Instrumental Relations (LIR) scale to determine if they had a fixed or growth theory, and completed a survey about their personal values.

At the end of the semester, they reported on the relationships they developed with other students in the course. The results revealed that participants with a fixed theory tended to build connections with students who shared similar values, while those with a growth theory were more likely to report ties to students who had different values.

We conducted two separate experiments to probe these findings further. In the first experiment, participants filled out the LIR scale and answered a series of questions about their personality traits. They were then offered the chance to sign up for a study with a random individual and were only given their potential partner's personality and demographic profile. While keeping demographic similarities constant, we manipulated the potential partner's dispositional qualities to be similar to or different from the participant. Participants then disclosed their perceived similarity and compatibility with the unknown individual, and whether they wanted to sign up for the study with them.

Participants with a fixed theory showed a lower sign-up rate if they believed their potential partner didn't share similar dispositional traits. They were also more likely to choose to work with a dispositionally similar partner than participants with a growth theory, as they perceived that having things in common would lead to better compatibility.

In a second experiment, participants were randomly split into two groups and manipulated into adopting either a fixed or growth mindset by thinking and writing about the analogy of relationships as muscles (growth theory) vs. puzzle pieces (fixed theory). They were subsequently paired at random for a discussion, and later asked to report on their satisfaction with their partner.

The results from this experiment revealed that those who were primed into having a fixed mindset experienced comparatively more dissatisfaction towards a partner with different opinions. Conversely, inducing a growth mindset increased participants' satisfaction with a dispositionally dissimilar partner, which suggests that lay theories can be taught among individuals.

A novel approach for hiring and diversity training

Our research shows that those with a fixed theory may be less likely to engage with dissimilar individuals than those with a growth theory. This challenges the idea that compatibility requires either surface-level or deep-rooted similarities, and suggests that social integration and inclusion can be achieved on the basis of effort and learning rather than whether people instantly click with each other.

This has practical implications for the modern workplace, especially when ensuring compatibility and harmony in heterogenous teams. For starters, rather than screening candidates for cultural fit, hiring managers could target culturally adaptive individuals with a growth mindset to facilitate optimal cohesiveness between dissimilar colleagues. One possibility for identifying such candidates could be using LIR to determine their lay theories.

A key takeaway from our research is that lay theories aren't set in stone. Rather, they can be quickly adopted as they are relatively simple, intuitive beliefs to understand and recognise once they are brought to conscious thought.

For instance, in the second experiment, getting participants to think and write about the analogy of relationships as muscles was enough to induce a growth mindset and for participants to value dissimilar partners in the given task. Someone with a fixed mindset about relationships can therefore be taught to have a growth mindset.

This can provide an alternative approach to diversity training, which has produced **mixed results**. Previous research has shown that programmes that target bias and prejudice directly through sensitivity or awareness training can backfire by **triggering resistance**.

Furthermore, efforts to promote social integration, including formal mentoring and events such as retreats, can yield **varied and often negative outcomes** for some individuals, making employees who already feel different from others even more isolated. Using lay theories may offer a less heavy-handed approach to diversity management – one that cultivates a growth mindset rather than "force-feeding" the virtues of diversity.

Instead of seeing compatibility – be it in love or at work – as being rooted in similarity, our research invites people to view it in terms of whether they are open to engaging with and adapting to their peers. Honing a growth mindset can make it easier for individuals to transcend demographic or dispositional

differences, and ultimately forge better and more meaningful connections with each other.

Find article at

https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/embracing-diversity-growth-mindset

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About the research

"Lay Theories of Instrumental Relations: Explaining Individual Differences in Dispositional Similarity-Attraction" is published in the Academy of Management Journal.