

# Managers' Interpersonal Skills and Their Role in Achieving Organizational Diversity and Inclusiveness

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This study is an analysis of workplace dynamics specific to diversity and inclusiveness (DI) as it relates to managerial effectiveness. The findings illustrate a direct correlation between the interpersonal skills related to versatility and leveraging diversity to sustain an inclusive organizational culture. The authors found that people can have a variety of individual behavioral styles or backgrounds, yet the key element to managerial effectiveness and organizational transformation is the level of versatility that an individual possesses. Much like the findings for emotional intelligence, this study offers an important perspective on individual effectiveness, attitude, and behavior. Managers can learn to be more versatile. This study provides an important mechanism to measure and achieve organizational results through versatility and effectiveness.

## Introduction

Globally, organizations in the governmental and private sectors proclaim with near universality a core value or key goal is to build a culture in which diversity increases through inclusiveness. A clear consensus for a definition of the term *diversity* or the term *inclusiveness* has yet to emerge from the literature for a number of reasons beyond the scope of this paper. In the realm of business and organizational systems, the term *diversity* is defined here as the myriad ways that human beings manifest their uniqueness through individual differences and how these dynamics influence behavior of the individual, the individual in a team, and the organization. The breadth and depth of the differences included in its definition may shift for

individual organizations. Some, for example, may include hierarchy, job classification, personality, or behavioral style in the definition, whereas others may be more specific and include only protected classes (race, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, color, and religion). The term *inclusiveness* or *inclusion* (Digh & Bennett, 2003; Society for Human Resource Management, 2012; Winters, 2012) is a set of processes intended to shift organizations toward a culture in which policies and procedures provide opportunities for all employees to excel. This culture often extends to customers as well.

This study brings together the two terms, *diversity* and *inclusiveness* practices, as DI. DI is a business imperative and a competitive strength. Much like the term *diversity*, DI extends beyond the legal

requirements (Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity, which specifically designate protected classes of people) to include a broad range of qualities that make people unique. And much like the term *inclusiveness*, in the framework of this study, DI is a set of principles, processes, and activities, internal and external to the organization, developed toward sustaining a culture where all *diversity* can thrive and where all people can be effective contributors in their roles. Proponents of DI (Thomas, 2009; Winters, 2012) believe that through DI interventions, individuals will be more effective in their roles, teams will be more innovative, and organizations will be more profitable.

These organizational efforts are not new, either in North America or in the European Union (EU), as demographic shifts, statutory requirements, business opportunities, and movements for social justice have motivated organizations to engage in DI initiatives over the past half century. However, Roosevelt Thomas (2009), a pioneer in the organizational diversity field, laments that after more than four decades there is little evidence of genuine progress in organizational diversity interventions. He states that while minorities and women may be more present in organizations, particularly in the lower ranks, the deeper efforts have not achieved building capacity to support decisions. The difficult task is “achieving organizational objectives in the midst of differences and similarities” (Thomas, 2009, p. 86).

Organizations face a day-to-day operational challenge in the effort to convert core value declarations or strategic goal statements about inclusiveness into cultural norms and consistent best practices in hiring, promotion, assignments, and team performance. In short, an ounce of genuine, open-minded acceptance is worth more than a pound of affirmative action policies, politically

correct internal communications, and diversity education programs. The latter efforts create a backdrop for DI to take root, but the mind-set and behavior of managers in an organization nourish the seed of DI and allow it to flourish.

In the quest to create a DI work environment, what factors will determine how well an organization will achieve that targeted outcome? How much of the responsibility rests on managers, and what aspects of their interpersonal skill set are most beneficial to an organizational effort at inclusiveness? This article recounts a study completed in 2011 that examined these questions and discovered that one set of interpersonal skills, labeled *versatility*, makes a difference.

Versatility is one of three orthogonal (independent) dimensions of the Social Style Profile (Mulqueen, 2009). The Social Style Profile provides multirater feedback on an individual’s assertiveness (influencing behavior on a continuum from “asking” to “telling”), responsiveness (display of emotion on a continuum from “controlling” to “emoting”), and versatility. The first two dimensions combine to form the Social Style model, providing insights in terms of behavioral style. Versatility, the focus of this study, is a measure of interpersonal effectiveness that has been shown to be highly correlated with two measures of emotional intelligence, the multirater version of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) and the Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSREI; Kraiger & Crane, 2009).

*Emotional intelligence* (EI), a term that first appeared in the professional literature more than two decades ago (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), is well described by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2004). Goleman (1995) popularized EI and made it a ubiquitous term, but, interestingly, the 2004 citation is entitled *Primal Leadership*, an indication of the importance that researchers have

placed on relating EI specifically to leadership and managerial effectiveness. A growing body of research has shown the ability of EI to predict success in a variety of occupations and industries, ranging from petroleum executives working across international borders (Mount, 2006) to military personnel (Bar-On, Handley, & Fund, 2006) and active combat soldiers (Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011). Recent research notes that EI has better predictive ability for individuals with customer-facing roles or jobs that require a high degree of interpersonal interaction (i.e., jobs high in emotional labor) than it does for individuals in jobs with low emotional labor (Cherniss, 2010).

Research has shown that versatility was a significant predictor of success for managers in an international publishing company and could be used to distinguish successful managers from less effective managers (TRACOM Group, 2005). This study demonstrated that managers with high versatility significantly outperformed their lower versatility counterparts across a spectrum of performance measures, such as leading teams, coaching, and likelihood of being promoted.

The work of Gardenswartz and colleagues (Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, & Rowe, 2008; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1994; Gardenswartz, Rowe, & Cherbosque, 2008) has focused on the importance of EI as it relates to DI. They rescripted the terminology in the EI model and wove in the concept of human differences and how the result influences what we know about ourselves and others. The concept of social awareness, for example, is replaced by the phrase “social architecting,” and self-awareness is replaced with “affirmative introspection.” Because tensions and stress naturally increase when differences collide, the model helps address what the authors refer to as “hot buttons.” This model suggests that to build a culture in which diversity increases through

inclusiveness, we focus on the emotional aperture required to manage through decisions, minimize microaggressions, and maneuver in a world in which likeness is not the norm.

Due to the importance of EI on leadership and to the relationship shown between EI and DI practices as shown by research, the authors of this study attempted to determine whether managers’ levels of versatility could distinguish between effectiveness at DI practices. We hypothesized that there would be a positive association between versatility and DI practices.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 143 managers of 232 invited (62% response rate) from the global training and learning division of a multinational defense contractor and 842 direct reports participated in the study. The participants were from the United States, although the company employs approximately 126,000 people worldwide. The organization has an active DI process that advises recruitment, hiring, development, community outreach, and multiple learning and development programs. The organization has received various honors and recognitions for its DI practices and considers its diversity a source of competitive advantage. All employees receive information about the company’s DI practices and are offered opportunities to increase their learning and development through formal courses and other programs, such as community outreach events and informal peer networking. Therefore, DI is a part of the company’s culture and formal value system, though the extent to which individual managers encourage and promote DI within their departments can vary.

All participants volunteered to take part in the study. Some managers did not respond to

certain demographic items; therefore, this information is incomplete. Of the completed information, the managers consisted of 71 males and 24 females, with the majority who responded aged 46 or older ( $n = 68$ ) and white ( $n = 78$ ). These individuals were highly educated (56 with postgraduate degrees and 36 with college degrees) and were mostly engineers ( $n = 54$ ). The majority of respondents had been with the organization for six years or more ( $n = 77$ ).

Each manager had at least three direct reports who were also solicited to participate as raters of their versatility and DI practices. Participation for managers and their direct reports was voluntary. Due to the constraints of applied research, the authors were unable to collect demographic data on the group of 842 direct reports who provided evaluations for the managers. This inability prevented accounting for potentially important moderators, such as gender, race, and age. Ideally, these data would have been obtained; however, collection was contrary to the policies of the organization and was therefore not possible.

### Versatility Measure

Versatility measures aspects of interpersonal effectiveness with others in the workplace. Specifically, it consists of four scales: image, presentation, competence, and feedback. Image (appropriateness of dress) and presentation (ability to deliver information in business settings effectively) make up only a minority of the versatility model. Competence (a measure of conscientiousness, flexibility, optimism, perseverance, and innovation) and feedback (skill at empathy, interpersonal communication, and relationship management) represent more than three quarters of the versatility scale and are therefore heavily represented in the overall versatility scale measurement (Mulqueen, 2009).

Versatility was measured using the Social Style Profile multirater questionnaire consisting of 88 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type agreement scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire measures the two factors that determine behavioral style (assertiveness and responsiveness) and versatility. Fifty-four items measure versatility. The questionnaire has good evidence for reliability and validity (Mulqueen, 2009).

In ascending order from low to high, quartiles of versatility positions compared to a general norm of working adults yield labels of “W,” “X,” “Y,” and “Z.” The lowest quartile of scores are labeled “W,” while the highest 25th percentile are “Z.” Versatility scores were calculated for each manager based on the averaged ratings of his or her direct reports. Most managers had versatility above the 50th percentile. Table 1 demonstrates the breakdown of numbers and percentages for the 143 managers.

A chi-square analysis of this versatility score distribution yielded a chi-square of 9.02 ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $df = 3$ ). The analysis indicates this group of managers is distinctly more versatile than would be

Table 1  
Versatility Score Distribution ( $N = 143$ )

Versatility Category	Number	Percent
W	20	14
X	31	22
Y	45	31
Z	47	33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>100%</b>

expected if versatility were equally distributed among the quartiles (i.e., 25% in each versatility category).

### Diversity and Inclusiveness Measure

Concurrent with the versatility assessment, each manager's direct reports also completed a 38-item diversity and inclusiveness survey. Respondents rated their managers on a 5-point Likert-type agreement scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This survey was developed for this study and was written to assess direct reports' perceptions of their manager's DI practices, departmental DI protocols, awareness of the organization's DI initiatives and programs, and the perceived impact of DI on important outcomes such as innovation and financial results. Therefore, the focus of the survey ranged from direct reports' perceptions of their manager's behavior to beliefs about the importance of DI and its effects on departments and the organization as a whole. Literature from the DI field guided development of the survey; however, due to constraints of the organization from which the sample was selected, the survey was designed to also measure elements deemed important by the organization. From an academic perspective, the preference would have been to administer a theoretically more comprehensive measure, an approach that was not possible from a practical standpoint.

Factor analysis on the survey data using maximum likelihood with oblique rotation revealed six interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for 71.2% of the variance. The first and strongest factor (43.4% of variance) consisted of six items measuring managers' behaviors (sample item: My manager recognizes the contributions of all employees). Scales were developed for each factor. Alpha reliabilities for these scales ranged from 0.84 to 0.97. Five survey

items did not load meaningfully onto factors. Table 2 lists the survey items and scale reliabilities.

### Analyses

To test the hypothesis, the authors conducted discriminant function analysis using the six DI scales as predictors of versatility. The DI predictors corresponded to the six DI scales uncovered through factor analysis: manager behavior, diversity impacts, rewards and recognition, diversity council, department practices, and manager encouragement. Level of versatility corresponded to the four quadrants that describe versatility from low to high: W, X, Y, and Z.

### Results

The authors used direct variable entry to calculate the discriminant function analysis. Three discriminant functions were calculated, with the first being significant (chi square [18] = 40.71,  $p < 0.01$ ), accounting for 84% of the variance, indicating a strong association between the DI predictors and level of versatility. The group centroids (mean discriminant scores on the function) for each level of versatility were  $-1.02$  (W versatility),  $-0.38$  (X versatility),  $0.20$  (Y versatility), and  $0.50$  (Z versatility). The centroids indicate that the discriminant function reliably separates the four versatility groups. The loading matrix of correlations between predictors and the discriminant function, as seen in Table 3, shows that the best predictors for distinguishing among the four versatility groups are (a) manager behavior, (b) department practices, (c) manager encouragement, and (d) diversity council. Managers with Z versatility have higher mean scores on each of these variables than the other three groups, with the minor exception of

Table 2

**Diversity and Inclusiveness Survey Scale Alpha and Item Statistics (N = 143)**

Scale: Manager Behavior Alpha = 0.97	Mean	SD
My manager values the different opinions of employees.	4.33	0.50
My manager tries to understand others' experiences from their perspective.	4.18	0.54
My manager treats me with respect.	4.47	0.45
My manager recognizes the contributions of all employees.	4.24	0.51
My manager is open to being persuaded by people who view things differently from him or her.	4.10	0.55
My manager fosters a welcoming environment for the team.	4.35	0.50
Scale: Diversity Impact Alpha = 0.94		
At this organization, I have seen evidence that diverse and inclusive teams are more successful at generating new business than teams that are less diverse and/or inclusive.	3.55	0.61
At this organization, I have seen evidence that diverse and inclusive teams generate more innovative ideas and solutions than teams that are less diverse and/or inclusive.	3.77	0.60
At this organization, I have seen evidence that diverse and inclusive teams deliver greater customer experiences than teams that are less diverse and/or inclusive.	3.72	0.59
Scale: Rewards and Recognition Alpha = 0.92		
Rewards and recognition are fair. (Note: This is distinct from the annual performance management review.)	3.39	0.57
The distribution of rewards and recognition is appropriately balanced among individuals and teams.	3.27	0.62
Rewards and recognition systems are inclusive of all locations. (Note: This is distinct from the annual performance management review.)	3.58	0.60
Scale: Diversity Council Alpha = 0.91		
I am aware of the diversity council.	4.24	0.46
The purposes of the diversity council have been communicated to me.	3.90	0.50
I understand the value that the diversity council brings to this organization.	3.80	0.55
I understand the inclusion mission.	3.96	0.48
The diversity and inclusion mission is directly linked to this organization's strategic imperatives or business results.	3.87	0.48
Scale: Department Practices Alpha = 0.91		
The people in my department value my ideas and opinions.	4.13	0.43
The people in my department treat one another with respect.	4.28	0.43
In my department, new team members feel welcomed and encouraged.	4.17	0.49
The people in my department feel supported and included.	3.96	0.52
In my department, a buddy or mentoring system is effectively utilized.	3.39	0.58

**Table 2**  
**Continued**

Scale: Department Practices Alpha = 0.91	Mean	SD
In my department, we have people with diverse talents and perspectives.	4.36	0.35
My department's hiring practices are aligned with the company's diversity and inclusion mission.	3.97	0.53
I am offered meaningful work assignments and opportunities.	4.06	0.41
Scale: Manager Encouragement Alpha = 0.84		
My manager has encouraged me to attend diversity and inclusion training.	3.43	0.65
My manager communicates the measurable impacts that diversity and inclusion practices have on our business.	3.36	0.57
My manager encourages employees to be involved in diversity and inclusion events.	3.90	0.57

diversity council, where the Y versatility group is slightly higher than the Z group. Table 3 also reveals a stepladder phenomenon; each ascending level of versatility has an accompanying higher mean score on each predictor variable, with the exception of the aforementioned anomaly. This analysis confirmed our hypothesis of a meaningful relationship between versatility and DI practices.

A classification procedure was computed for all 143 cases in this sample. Because the sample sizes for the four versatility groups were uneven, the classification scheme was programmed to use sample proportions as prior probabilities: 0.14 for W versatility ( $n = 20$ ), 0.22 for X versatility ( $n = 31$ ), 0.32 for Y versatility ( $n = 45$ ), and 0.33 for Z versatility ( $n = 47$ ). A total of 65 (46%) of the cases were correctly classified, compared to 39 (27%) that would be classified correctly by chance alone. The number of correct classifications expected due to chance was calculated by multiplying each group's sample size by its prior probability and summing these results. Higher levels of versatility were correctly classified more often than those

with lower levels of versatility. Correct classification for each group was: W versatility ( $n = 7$ , 35%), X versatility ( $n = 8$ , 26%), Y versatility ( $n = 19$ , 42%), and Z versatility ( $n = 31$ , 66%). Because a larger sample size was unavailable, it was not possible to check the stability of the classification procedure through cross-validation.

## Discussion

Discriminant analysis distinguished between levels of versatility based on several aspects of managers' DI practices. In particular, managers' personal behaviors related to DI had the strongest influence on perceptions of their versatility, followed by departmental practices (which are likely to be heavily influenced by managers), manager encouragement to take part in DI activities, and awareness of the organization's diversity council. The two remaining variables, beliefs about rewards and recognition and beliefs about the impacts that DI has on various outcomes, were not related to managers' versatility. These findings indicate that

**Table 3**  
**Results of Discriminant Function Analysis for Versatility Category (*N* = 143)**

Predictor Variable	Correlations With Discriminant Function	Univariate <i>F</i> (3, 139)	Mean (SD)				Pooled Within-Group Correlations Among Predictors							
			W Versatility	X Versatility	Y Versatility	Z Versatility	b	c	d	e	f			
a. Manager behavior	0.966	12.05*	3.86 (0.68)	4.13 (0.39)	4.34 (0.36)	4.50 (0.37)	0.617	0.549	0.297	0.407	0.233			
b. Department practices	0.709	6.50*	3.80 (0.41)	3.93 (0.39)	4.08 (0.32)	4.16 (0.31)		0.562	0.537	0.561	0.432			
c. Manager encouragement	0.526	3.68**	3.28 (0.69)	3.49 (0.46)	3.58 (0.42)	3.71 (0.52)			0.500	0.404	0.337			
d. Diversity council	0.460	3.14**	3.71 (0.50)	3.92 (0.39)	4.03 (0.34)	4.01 (0.45)				0.459	0.545			
e. Rewards and recognition	0.378	2.38	3.12 (0.69)	3.43 (0.41)	3.44 (0.50)	3.50 (0.59)					0.476			
f. Diversity impacts Canonical <i>R</i> Eigenvalue	0.247 0.466 0.278	0.90	3.55 (0.65)	3.63 (0.53)	3.67 (0.57)	3.78 (0.55)								

\* *p* < 0.01.  
 \*\* *p* < 0.05.

managers with strong versatility (interpersonal effectiveness) are also seen as more supportive of DI by their direct reports. Managers with high versatility engage in personal behaviors that contribute to a diverse and inclusive team environment.

Further, there are significant and noticeable differences in the DI practices of managers with lower versatility and those with higher versatility. Managers with high versatility were more likely to engage in pro-DI behaviors, such as actively trying to understand others' experiences and perspectives, recognizing employees' contributions, fostering a welcoming environment for the team, and valuing different opinions. The benefits of higher versatility would seem to include not only better overall management but the promotion of a more diverse and inclusive organizational culture. Employees see a strong relationship between their manager's interpersonal effectiveness (versatility) and their DI behaviors.

One of the more interesting results is that the strongest predictor was manager behavior, a set of very specific behaviors that are directly under the control of managers, such as "My manager tries to understand others' experiences from their perspective" and "My manager treats me with respect." Within the department practices variable, the second-largest predictor sample items include "The people in my department feel supported and included" and "In my department, we have people with diverse talents and perspectives." Again, these are practices that are likely to be heavily influenced by individual managers and the atmosphere that they help create through their leadership behaviors. Although still significant, smaller relationships were found between versatility and two other predictors—manager encouragement and awareness of the diversity council. A sample item for manager encouragement is "My manager has

encouraged me to attend diversity and inclusion training," and for diversity council, "I understand the value that the diversity council brings to this organization."

The findings from the current study correspond with previous research that revealed a positive association between managers' interpersonal effectiveness and their leadership effectiveness (Mount, 2006; TRACOM Group, 2005). Versatility highly correlates with two measures of emotional intelligence: the multirater version of the TEIQue and the SSREI (Kraiger & Crane, 2009). Given the positive relationship between versatility and emotional intelligence (Kraiger & Crane, 2009), the current study contributes to understanding the theoretical role of emotional intelligence in relation to DI practices (Gardenswartz et al., 2008).

Within the body of DI research, the current study offers new and important implications, namely, that organizations can enhance their DI through increasing their leaders' levels of versatility. This implication is important because much of the academic and popular literature on DI focuses on the effects of DI on issues such as employee retention and demographic shifts in the workplace (Hubbard, 2003), rather than how individuals can develop the capacity for creating DI environments.

The findings of the current study indicate that in addition to activities and interventions intended to *directly* enhance DI, organizations can improve DI *indirectly* through helping leaders and others in the organization develop their versatility, or EI. With the growing evidence that such skills can be learned, practiced, and retained effectively (Cherniss, Grimm, & Liautaud, 2010), developing versatility would be a potentially important and efficient method for enhancing DI while also realizing other benefits of emotionally intelligent leadership.

## Study Limitations

Certain aspects of this study could be improved upon in future research. Sample sizes for some cells were lower than desired. Although having fewer leaders with low versatility is good from the organization's perspective (i.e., more managers with high versatility), it would be helpful to obtain data from a larger sample with greater representativeness in each versatility category. In addition, although the "real-world" setting should be considered an advantage in terms of the applicability of applied research, it also forced some limitation on the amount of data that could be collected, particularly on the attributes of the DI survey itself. The DI survey included important aspects related to academic theory around DI, but was also tailored to the specific needs of the organization. Future research would benefit from including a more theoretically rigorous measure.

## Conclusion

This study showed that managers with high versatility were rated significantly more effective at promoting diversity and inclusiveness than managers with lower versatility. Importantly, these evaluations came from the managers' direct reports, those who are in a particularly good position to determine managers' interpersonal effectiveness and DI behaviors. Given the challenges that organizations face with regard to developing and maintaining diverse and inclusive cultures, this study helps shed light on the critical impact that department managers and, by logical extrapolation, leaders throughout the organization have on such a culture. Because versatility, or EI, has been shown to be amenable to learning and development, this provides at least one pathway for encouraging DI practices within organizations. ♦

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