

How Diversity Enhances Collaboration

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, September 4, 2010

The meeting was almost over. Everyone seemed to agree on which of the two potential new lift trucks we would buy. Everybody but Tom was celebrating the decision.

Only Sam had noticed that Tom slowly turned away during the conversation, crossed his arms, and stared blankly at the wall. Earlier, he had argued for the other lift truck, but no one was willing to listen.

Each time Tom tried to speak, someone dismissed his comment, arguing for his or her own point of view. Tom had imperceptibly dropped out of the conversation, almost as if he was no longer in the room. No one seemed to notice--or care. Except Sam.

Sam was the warehouse manager. He was the ultimate decision-maker about the new lift truck. Rather than make the selection on his own, he sought the input of the maintenance manager, the site engineer, and his team members. He had recently been reminded of the value of collaboration, so he was ultra-sensitive making sure he sought it.

Tom was an experienced lift truck driver. Sam stayed behind when everyone else left the conference room. He waited, hoping Tom would say something. Tom didn't move. His body had melted into the chair as if he'd just received some very bad news.

Sam walked over to Tom and sat down beside him, trying to imagine what was in his mind. Tom's posture didn't change. Finally, Sam asked, "What are you thinking about, Tom?"

Tom looked at the floor. "We're going to kill somebody."

Sam was stunned. "What do you mean?"

The question was like flipping a switch. Suddenly Tom came alive, standing up and flailing his arms as he bounced around the room. "With us lifting those bales as high as we stack 'em, we're gonna tip over one of those new trucks. Whoever's driving will be thrown across the warehouse!"

Sam didn't understand. Calmly, he said, "I'm sorry, Tom, I don't understand. Please tell me more."

Tom was frustrated that Sam couldn't see the obvious. "Every time I lift one of our bales to that fifth level, I'm scared to death. Oh, I know our current lift trucks can handle it, but I'm still always careful. The back wheels of those new trucks will come off the floor with a load up that high. If we buy that truck, we're going to pay for it with more than money!" Tom's eyes were now intense.

Sam asked Tom why he hadn't shared this in the meeting. Tom's flailing arms went into double time. "I did--several times! Nobody wanted to hear my opinion." Tom abruptly sat back down, shaking his head. Then he looked directly into Sam's eyes saying, "All the 'experts' had already made up their minds!"

Sam now understood why Tom had given up. Tom knew something nobody else recognized, and he wasn't articulate enough to gain anyone else's attention. "Tom, stay here for just a minute."

Sam rushed out of the room, looking for the site engineer. "Hey, will you spend some time with Tom? I'd like you to run some calculations on the lift capacity of that new truck."

The engineer's analysis confirmed what Tom experientially knew. Both Sam and the engineer apologized that they had not listened to the concerns Tom had raised.

What does the word “diversity” mean to you? Most people immediately think of differences in race, gender, religion, or culture. Yet every person in your organization brings some pretty cool stuff (also known as “unique perspectives and life experiences”) with them that can’t easily be seen. In this case, Sam and the others almost missed the very practical experience that Tom could contribute.

What are you overlooking in your organization? Do you see the differences in people as a problem? Or do you value those differences, realizing they make collaboration the powerful tool that can set your organization apart from the competition?

Collaboration isn’t just the application of the maxim “two heads are better than one.” It’s capitalizing on the treasury of information and perspective that’s in those heads. You can’t get that unique perspective if you don’t create the proper environment. And when it’s offered, you must be listening to both what is said AND what the person is not capable of saying. Not being able to articulate doesn’t mean the knowledge isn’t there!

Sure, you’ve got an education. Tom’s education occurred on the job. What was Tom’s awareness worth in this case? Maybe saving a life?

Let’s give Sam a break. After all, the group meeting to seek other input was his idea. Once he was engaged, however, he got caught up in the emotion of the moment and forgot to listen to minority opinions. Sam realized later that he could have listened more thoroughly to Tom. Further, as the leader of the meeting, he could have asked the entire room to listen to Tom’s insight.

This is a true story. Sam’s a friend of mine and was the warehouse manager for the plant where we both worked. I was at this meeting, patiently waiting to talk with Sam about another issue.

Sam and I have told this true story many times. The experience provided new insight into “valuing diversity and differences” to Sam and the other members of his team.

What could you gain by valuing the diversity among your team members? Each person brings a whole lot of pretty cool stuff with them. How (and how often) do you invite your team members to share insights they’ve acquired from their life experiences?

Dennis Hooper helps organizational leaders strengthen their culture, processes, and results. Contact him at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or 770-286-2250. Website: www.buildingfutureleaders.com.