COGNITIVE DIVERSITY
A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEADERSHIP
Want better productivity and greater leadership effectiveness?

The answer is simple...

It all comes down to valuing cognitive diversity.

Diversity is important. All companies should be embracing it. And when you get it right, it can lead to transformational business outcomes most organisations only dream about.

There's a falsehood that persists about diversity. Some think if you put a certain group around a table – say, a heterosexual man and woman, a person from a different ethnic background, and a person from another sexual orientation, all at various life-stages – that you'll get diversity of thought. But that's simply not the case, because they could all have very similar thinking styles and preferences.

Cognitive diversity is recognising that all of us have different ways of gathering and processing information; of making decisions and communicating. It's more than just gender or ethnicity – it really comes down to personality. It's about tapping into the different ways we think and harnessing that to unlock solutions and solve problems, both at work and in society. Research shows when you have diverse teams that know how to lean into those different thinking styles and preferences, you can get the best outcomes.

It's 2018. We're all knowledge workers now. And yet, we're not fully tapping into the knowledge in our people's heads. Many organisations are still hierarchies, operating under outdated 19th century industrial models that need to be revised. The 'my way is the right way' is old style thinking – and it does nothing to solve the problems we're facing in corporate Australia around values, around purpose and around a range of messy, complex challenges.
COGNITIVE DIVERSITY, A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEADERSHIP

BUILDING COGNITIVELY DIVERSE TEAMS

The right team is everything, and it starts at the top down. Assessing the cognitive style of your leaders is key; deep-diving into how leaders behave and why, and identifying entrenched thoughts, beliefs and assumptions. People are made up of different experiences and leadership is not about having all the answers. Leadership is about asking the right questions of individuals that have different points of view to us, and then shaping our response accordingly.

It’s also about helping employees understand their own thinking style. This is deeply reflective work, questioning how you gather information and make decisions, how intuitive you are, whether you’re people-orientated or more rational and analytical. Assessing communication style is key, too: do you think more than you talk? Or do you process your ideas by bouncing them off other people?

There are many personality styles and ways of viewing the world, and you need those differences around that table – because that’s when true cognitive diversity comes out.

THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE RESPECT

Not surprisingly, leadership capability comes into play here. A good leader will be able to hear all the different voices in the room and constructively steer attention to the ideas or perspectives shared rather than the individuals. You want and need leaders to do this part: to ensure the focus is on how we can solve the problem, not attack or criticize different perspectives. And everyone’s voice around the table needs to be heard and valued – the critical ‘inclusion’ part to the equation – to get that to happen.

Research shows that one of the ways to enable this is to foster something called cognitive respect – the ability to have everyone connect and understand that each person has a valid, but perhaps different, perspective. It’s about listening with respect, listening to learn, and then being curious around building from these ideas rather than taking a very competitive, binary view.

Will there be conflict? Initially, sure – because as humans, we want people to agree with us. And when someone says, ‘Hang on, I don’t see it that way’, people clash. But good leaders know how to harness that conflict and constructively work through it to get to a better solution.

“...it’s the key to a more productive, efficient organisation.”

Go to www.mercer.com.au/PTYP to learn more about Pathways to Your Potential™ experiences.
COGNITIVE DIVERSITY: THE BENEFITS

The majority of companies I work with understand, at a rational level, why diversity and inclusion is important. But it’s interesting seeing it in action. You start to appreciate how much difference there is around you, on the desk next to you, on the next floor. It opens up a whole new way of relating to others.

Similarly, leaders who’ve had experience walking in someone else’s shoes, so to speak, suddenly also recognise they have the power and authority to change the system. It’s more than policies, it’s more than targets, it’s actually about them as individuals becoming inclusive leaders, being aware and taking action. And it can have a powerful ripple effect.

Cognitive diversity can result in better productivity – and greater leadership effectiveness. Good leaders can inspire employees to do more because they want to, rather than just existing in a clock-on-clock-off transactional exchange. It’s about transformational change, and reaping the rewards of the additional effort people go to when they want to work for a leader – a leader who sees them for the individual they are.

You’ve also got a boost in efficiency because you’re solving problems more effectively, with the diversity of thought sitting around the table. And then you’ve got just the general engagement of what it feels like to be valued. You can’t put a price on that.

Companies that don’t invest in or embrace cognitive diversity might be fine in the short term, but long-term, research shows people want more from their employers. Yes, you might make the target this year or meet your shareholder expectations next year, but that continuing, sustainable performance from your team isn’t going to be there if you’re not investing in this stuff right now.

Don’t let your organisation get left behind. Reach out now for a discussion about recognizing and valuing cognitive diversity in your company – especially where it will have the most impact.

Go to www.mercer.com.au/P2YP to learn more about Pathway to Your Potential™ experiences or click here to connect with Jess.
Dr Jess Murphy is in the business of disrupting traditional corporate structures to move them into the 21st Century mindset. She has over 20 years experience in Corporate Australia, achieving results in dynamic roles – from generalist to specialist; individual contributor to leader of leaders. This, plus ongoing academic contributions as an Adjunct Professor in business leadership means you can expect progressive thinking with practical application.

Dr Jess Murphy recognises the importance of working with today’s leaders to create a brighter tomorrow working closely with senior leaders and executives to develop their own confidence in terms of how to effectively ‘involve difference’ as well as advocate and support those different to them. This involves challenging leaders to step outside their comfort zones and view the world from a different but equally valid perspective.

The recent strategic alliance between Mercer and Dr Jess Murphy will focus on accelerating change in this space through empowering talented individuals to take action and put themselves forward with confidence as well as tapping into the latent potential of leaders to become more effective in involving and advocating for those ‘different’ to them.