The power of "hardliners" and "softies"

Five steps to make diversity work

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How to make diversity really work and get the best out of two radically opposed work styles?

A real life case study

The social services department of a big city has, in each of its customer facing teams, a mix of very different work styles. Apparently the customer service workers take very different positions on a scale between, on the one hand, formal/rule based/critical/distant and, on the other, an empathic/people oriented/trustful/personal approach. If you plot all staff on a bell curve of work style you would see a very varied picture, with quite a significant number of people on both extreme ends of the spectrum. In black and white terms, there is a polarisation going on between "hardliners" and "softies".

The impact of having two conflicting styles operating within the one space can have a highly negative impact on both organisational performance and customer experience. If we take the social services department as an example: citizens that were allowed to progress to the next step in the process by a "softie" were often sent back to the beginning again by a "hardliner" responsible for the next step, based on a different assessment of the same case. These conflicting judgements are frustrating not only because they prevent the process from becoming efficient (high level of 'rework'), but also because of the impact on the citizens themselves, who don't know what to expect and as a result feel very out-of-control in relation to their own lives.

"Hardliners" are reinforced
The current political climate has shifted more towards control and fraud detection with respect to social allowance claims, compared with a previous focus on social responsibility and care. Therefore those who are natural "hardliners" feel their approach is reinforced and have a tendency to shift even further towards this side of the spectrum. Yet when the pendulum swung in the other direction a few years ago, when social responsibility and care was the political credo, the natural "softies" were favoured.

Prisoner security risk
This is not a unique case however. Research has shown that a similar pattern can be found with prison staff. In each team of prison warders there will be a mix of basically two styles: a style focused on individual understanding, trust and empathy and a style based on rules, control and keeping distance. Within a prison this not only gives rise to irritation and tension within teams and between different work shifts, but also creates uncertainty and frustration with detainees as they are treated very differently depending on the warden. This can lead to high security risks within the prison walls. In fact, if you look at it more broadly it seems to be a strikingly universal pattern. You will probably find the same polarity in client facing teams in all sectors (think of teachers, contact center workers, nursing staff, insurance claim handlers).

Customers pay the price but nothing is being done
Although this is a crucial factor influencing customer experience and process efficiency, often nothing has been done to address this. The main reason is that organisations often don't know how to handle this effectively and line managers don't feel comfortable or equipped to address these intangible behavioural aspects with their staff. It is a key point of daily irritation, but no one speaks about it and it is more or less accepted as a fact of life. Instead the investments made to improve customer experience are all focused on very tangible aspects, like better accessibility by phone or more convenient opening times. But for as long as customers are confronted with the effects of large differences in style and approach, these investments will have little impact and won't pay off.

Situational service-ship
So how do you address this in an effective way? Would the solution be to define, prescribe, train and enforce one uniform and consistent style for everyone? Probably not... The concept of all staff being empathic or strict or something in between does not account for the specificity of different situations. There are clearly situations (and customers) where strictness and control are slightly more important than empathy and trust, and the other way around. You should even ask yourself if it would be feasible and desirable to change people's natural style. It is not at all energising and authentic to constantly play the role of someone you are not.

An effective approach starts with the recognition of the strength of the two poles of this polarity. Both can be very effective approaches depending on the context and you will need both approaches in your organisation to be able to adapt to different situations. Something like 'situational service-ship' springs to mind, a similar concept to that of 'situational leadership'.
Recognising that both styles have equal value, that both are needed, and making this understanding explicit is the first big step. But it needs more than that to make it work in practice.

5 steps in support of situational service-ship
We have identified five steps that you can follow, which really use the power of diversity to boost performance, client satisfaction and staff motivation:

1. **Aware of own style.** Make people aware of their own preferred style, the impact of it on others in different situations, as well as its strengths and limitations. This would enable individuals in the team to better control undesired effects, to better moderate their style in certain situations that call for something different, and to avoid extremities and polarisation.

2. **Value of the opposite style**. Inspire people to recognise the values and strengths of their opposing style, going beyond any well-known negatives and differentiating its positive core from the extreme forms in which it might appear. This means uncovering underlying positive values hidden behind negative labels such as 'Hardliner' or 'bureaucratic formalist'. Being strict or critical can be a very positive thing and can even be done in an empathic and agreeable way.

3. **Experiment and stretch.** Motivate people to experiment with the alternative style, while keeping their authenticity and not by trying to become someone they are not. E.g. experiment with being a little stricter, without turning into a bureaucratic formalist. This means encouraging people to stretch themselves a little, to leave their comfort zone, but still respect their natural boundaries.

4. **Situational flexibility.** Stimulate people to broaden their reach within this broad spectrum of behaviours and to become able to switch, depending on the situation, between a strict and an empathic approach, whilst respecting their natural preferences and boundaries. This could even lead to the creation of a new blended style, like empathic strictness or strict empathy.

5. **Complementarity.** Make maximum use of people's natural styles when allocating tasks and place people in situations, with clients and tasks, where their style is the most appropriate and effective. E.g. allocate the citizens that need the clearest guidance and higher levels of control to the people who lean towards a stricter preferred style.

Ivo Brughmans is a philosopher and management consultant. Ivo is fascinated by paradoxes and the challenge to bring together opposite approaches, both in personal leadership, organisations and society as a whole. Ivo has written several books on this theme, developing a 'both/and' perspective as a radical alternative to our current way of living, managing, governing and coaching. Ivo lives in Antwerp, Belgium and works with public and private organisations around the globe. See also https://paradoxical-leadership.com.