

Diversity Fosters Leadership Skills

We usually discuss about how inclusive leadership fosters diversity in companies. Let's now think the other way round. Does diversity foster leadership? Do diversity-linked professional and personal experiences contribute to the process of transformation of leaders' mindset? The answer is yes. Satya Nadella's leadership transformation is such an example.

Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft in February 2014 and in less than four years he transformed the company's culture into a more empathic one that opened new possibilities for learning and cooperation, but also for innovation and understanding customers' needs.

This cultural shift concerned both employees' inclusion, by hiring a diverse workforce, and customers' inclusion, by providing products and services, and by developing inspiring technologies allowing disabled customers to have accessible experiences.

In order to operate this transformation of the business strategy and culture, Nadella used, among others, four leadership skills:

- empathy
- deep understanding
- collaboration
- humility

Empathy for employees' needs in order to become more creative; **indepth understanding** of customers' requirements; **collaboration** with former competitors, the value of which may have been underestimated previously; **humility**, by accepting errors, his and his employees', and learning from them.

The challenge of two of his children's disabilities helped Nadella hone his inclusive leadership skills

The skills and behaviours mentioned above clearly contributed to the foundations of Nadella's inclusive leadership style. They were honed over years of experience as father of a son with severe Cerebral Palsy and a daughter with learning difficulties.

These challenges helped Nadella **strengthen his empathy** in the sense of the capacity of putting himself in his children's shoes and understand what their needs were; **increase his openness to collaboration**, as it happened with regards to how his family dealt with the situation, as well as with the supporting network of therapists and parents of disabled children around him; **develop his humility**, by accompanying his children in their life long struggle with disability, made of achievements and failures.

Inclusive leadership does not happen over night

Nadella admits that these skills didn't happen to him overnight, although he clearly remembers that there was a difference between who he was as a person before and after the birth of his son. The process of developing these skills was a complex one as Nadella, besides caring for his children, got involved into supporting the Microsoft community of disabled employees for several years long before becoming CEO, which helped him learn about all types of disabilities and their specific needs.

Inclusive leadership and company's performance

What we can all learn from Nadella's example is that empathy is an essential skill for increasing a company's performance in a fast-moving marketplace. It helps understanding the imperative of developing new products, being able to develop these products by creating a safe space for trial and error, recruiting and retaining talents, and building strategic partnerships.

All organisations have the potential of fostering a growth mindset culture leading to a secure environment based on empathy and respect in the process of learning, be it from successes or from failures. This can only be possible if the CEO is walking the talk, if she or he closely encourages the employees, showing them that she or he is with them.

Diversity helps developing leadership skills

Personal and professional experiences shape the way individuals evolve in their understanding and reacting to their environment.

Diversity-linked situations have the potential of creating contexts in which leaders can hone a large set of skills, amongst which empathy, because they have to manage persons with different sensitivities, with different ways of thinking and behaving at work.

The more confronted to diversity-linked situations, like disability, for example, the more leaders at all levels become more emphatic and, implicitly, more inclusive. Diversity is an excellent training tool in developing leadership skills. That is one of the reasons why it is important for companies to bring diversity into their workforce.



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