

Seven of us were gathered from around the globe for three long days of meetings. We were a diverse group: Millennial, retired, male, female, and with a wide range of pet topics. Our choices would set the course of our organization for years to come.

It was a unique experience that I wish was common: In the face of diversity and considerable disagreement, there was an overwhelming sense of unity.

Our culture's trend is to vilify and reject everything said by anyone with a contrary opinion. I suspect most people believe agreement is a prerequisite to unity. But unity lets a team disagree and live to fight a healthy fight another day.



Characteristics that Create Unity

A shared sense of purpose. Unity needs a focus that is bigger than my need to be right. The more we care about what we want to accomplish the more personal sacrifices we'll be willing to make for the cause.

An eagerness to learn. What are your next words likely to be after you say, "I disagree with you"? For most of us it's probably something like, "and here's why." Give this sequence a try: "I disagree with you...*tell me more.*" Stephen R. Covey's habit of "seek first to understand, *then* to be understood" is a unity-building practice. Which way would you like others to approach you?

Believing the best of others. If I tell you to find me by "going one mile, turning left, then right at the light", will you wind up where I am? Obviously, that depends on where you start. It's the same with rational arguments. If we start in different places (assumptions, experiences, training, etc.) we can look at the same information and reach different conclusions. Perhaps if we understood each other's starting point we wouldn't accuse each other of being irrational, uncaring, evil, or stupid.

Vulnerability. We won't get the best result if I withhold my views out of fear of being proven wrong. I'm willing to build my reputation on being a valuable team player rather than on having to be right all the time. And I need to acknowledge and appreciate when others have a valid point even if their point isn't good for my case. If I can't do that, why should I expect them to?

Is It Worth It?

These characteristics of unity build on trust, humility, and self-confidence (not being devastated by realizing I might be wrong). There is organizational strength that only comes from valuing diversity, and these are traits that make that possible.

The middle ground isn't always the best solution. But learning from the whole range of perspectives allows us to craft the best overall solution – even if that solution isn't best for me personally. The solution to any complex problem is really just making a good choice about which residual problems we're going to live with. A united team cares about how all others are impacted even when negative consequences are inevitable.

Great solutions require the breadth of understanding that only comes from valuing diverse input.