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A NEW APPROACH TO ACHIEVE INCLUSION, DIVERSITY AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE ALL AT ONCE

— Asking The HR Community For Help Developing Comprehensive Solutions To A Multidimensional Problem.

A New Approach To Achieve Inclusion, Diversity and Organisational Performance all at Once

— *Asking the HR community for help developing comprehensive solutions to a multidimensional problem*

Management summary

As a 2018 McKinsey report demonstrated again, lack of inclusion and diversity — in the workforce and in leadership-roles throughout the organisation — is correlated with lagging organisational performance. This observation has resulted in a range of measures, usually as part of HR-lead diversity programs, to improve diversity in the work force and in leadership teams.

This article argues that diversity is not a *driver* of performance, but goes *hand in hand* with it. It is what happens when expertise is utilised to overcome prevalent social biases. Diversity programs play an important role, but the challenge intersectionality poses can't be overcome by setting targets. The problem is systemic.

Social biases enter organisations whenever choices are made which are not fully substantiated — e.g., through hierarchical decision making and as often found in rules, protocols, procedures, contracts, etc. Organisations can overcome these social biases by creating the conditions to optimally utilise expertise — where expertise has no colour, gender, religion, body-type, title, socio-economic background, accent, etc.

As such, lack of diversity is an organisational *red flag* — it indicates the organisation underutilises expertise. And this includes the expertise of the privileged as well: they may have been given the opportunity, but they, too, suffer from the frustration of lack of freedom, autonomy and trust.

The consequence of underutilising expertise is suboptimal organisational performance. The lack of diversity which goes hand in hand with it, signals to the outside world that the organisation is not an attractive employer for talents, and not an attractive partner for other organisations.

This article proposes a new pathway to both achieve greater organisational performance as well as inclusion and diversity. It solicits the expertise, energy and motivation of the HR community to develop and implement new measures to this extent. This article provides some pointers as to what some of these measures may look like.

Organisations who manage to optimally utilise available expertise are, by definition, *human centric* organisations. This article proposes that *Human Resource* departments are perfectly positioned to take on a much more pivotal and impactful role in organisations than "merely" managing the employee life cycle and administering employee benefits.

HR departments can be, and in the author's view should be, drivers for organisational performance. It is the quickest road to do away with the grievances of racism and discrimination, and achieve inclusion and diversity instead.

Content

Lack of diversity is a problem, but are diversity programs the solution?

Lack of diversity in the workforce at large, and all the more so in leadership positions, is a well documented and pressing problem many organisations are trying to address. They do so for various reasons, as is reflected by the range of initiatives and measures developed as part of inclusion, equity and diversity programs. But are such programs addressing the underlying problem, or are they putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound?

Are diversity programs putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound?

If you develop a program, you define a desired outcome. Progress will be measured in terms of goals and targets. Most of these targets involve race and gender. They are relatively easy to measure, to report on and to demonstrate "progress" with. But it is also a reductionist approach.

Lack of diversity and inclusion has many causes. Many of these causes are firmly rooted in a society's history and result in a wide array of social biases. These biases interact in ways that create complex systems of oppression and power (see Figure 1). This phenomenon of "intersectionality" expresses itself in lack of diversity, but it can't be "repaired" by setting diversity-targets for new hires and leadership positions.
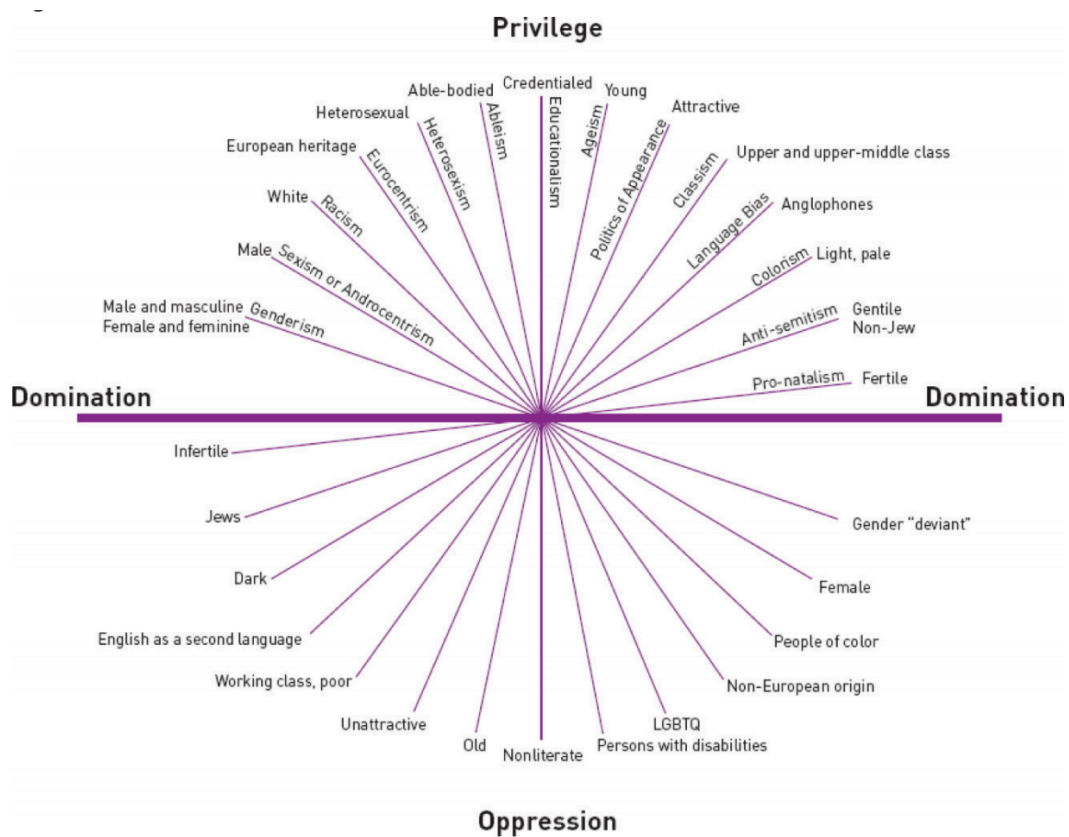

Figure 1. Wheel of Privilege and Oppression (from [1]).

Google's 2020 Diversity annual report details how a plethora of measures has resulted in stark improvements for a range of diversity indicators [2]. But also a comprehensive, well-funded and "results producing" program as that of Google can only do so much. It reports intersectional hiring numbers for the combination of gender and ethnicity, knowing that socio-economic background, religion, attractiveness, age and a host of other factors also play a role when it comes to inclusion and diversity.

Social biases affect each and every choice throughout the organisation

The real issue is that social biases are not only in play when hiring or promoting someone. They affect each and every choice made throughout the organisation: who will give a presentation? Chair a meeting? Meet a customer? Contribute to a discussion? Attend a training? Set the agenda?

These and many more and also more subtle choices are all expressions of social biases which collectively determine how someone experiences the work culture. A diversity program may — as Google's does — look at the profile of those who feel compelled to leave the company and "work one-on-one with employee cohorts whose attrition rates are above-average," but as long as social biases get leeway within organisations, it can only address the symptoms.

Which begs the question, how do social biases get leeway within organisations?

Through what mechanism do social biases enter organisations?

Everyone has social biases. Social biases can't be checked at the door. They play a role in all we do, and even when you are aware of them they can't be consciously suppressed. And this is true also when making choices [3,4]. Which is what happens throughout the organisation, all of the time. And it is exactly here where the difference can be made.

One important reason to have a diversity program is organisational performance. It has been demonstrated — including in the 2018 McKinsey report "Delivering through Diversity" [5] — that there is a statistically significant correlation between diversity in the leadership team (in terms of both gender and ethnicity) and profitability. Even though the McKinsey report is careful in pointing out that "correlation does not demonstrate causation," it does encourage organisations to look at the potential of inclusion and diversity strategies.

Is diversity in leadership positions a *cause* or an *effect* of organisational performance?

But what if inclusion and diversity — be it in the workforce or in leadership positions — doesn't *cause* superior organisational performance, but goes *hand in hand* with it?

What if organisations are successful in achieving their aims because they optimally utilise all of the expertise that is available to them? What if expertise has no gender, colour, religion, body-type, accent or sexual orientation? What if successful organisations are successful because they manage to "overcome" social biases when making choices?

There is a logic to this. Organisations trying to achieve a desired outcome make two types of choices: choices which *increase the risk* the desired outcome will *not* be achieved (or only using many more resources than minimally required), and choices which *don't increase this risk*.

Organisations have a word for choices which increase risk, they call it a decision

The latter type of choice is made by experts. Experts are able to substantiate why what needs to be done next. To them, in their field of expertise, the situation is transparent. What needs to be done is obvious, and, in fact, no longer involves a choice. In an organisational context, choices which don't increase risk aren't in need of anything, except, perhaps, an approval or a go-ahead.

Which leaves organisations with the choices which *do* increase risk. Organisations have a special name for this type of choice which is not fully substantiated to contribute to achieve a desired outcome. They call it a decision. And decisions are notorious for two reasons. First, they increase risk (because they lack full substantiation). Second, in making decisions numerous *decision making biases* — including social biases — are at play [3,4].

Organisations which minimise decision making will have more diversity

Organisations which minimise decision making minimise the leeway social biases are given. Organisations which minimise decision making — e.g., by working with non-ambiguous desired outcomes throughout the organisation, by recruiting and identifying expertise, by having a safe and open culture which allows this expertise to come to the table — will find that expertise is diverse, and so is their workforce and their leadership team. They will find that theirs is a high performance organisation.

Vice versa, organisations which strictly adhere to hierarchical decision making — where choices are made by someone based on their position in the hierarchy, without the need for substantiation, without recourse, without identifying/treating them as a potential risk — where aims are unclear or political, and where numerous rules and procedures are in place, will find that expertise can't be identified, and that, if not their workforce, than at least their leadership team is a one-to-one reflection of prevailing social biases about leadership. They will find organisational performance to be lagging. They uphold racism and discrimination [11].

In short: diversity is not the driver of performance, they come as one. They are intrinsically linked. You can't have one without the other.

A new powerful argument for inclusion and diversity

Several explanations have been offered for diversity in leadership teams *resulting* in improved organisational performance. Among them are "diversity of thought" and the trickle down effect of "representation". But is still requires a company culture willing to listen to different voices — also within the board room itself — and to let experts make the choices, instead of escalating everything up the hierarchy, to allow diversity to make a difference.

In organisations where those in leadership-roles create and sustain the conditions to get the most out of their employees' skills and motivation, "diversity" may very well positively reinforce this culture. But setting and achieving ethnicity targets in hiring or in promotions doesn't bring about a change of culture. Having a certain gender or racial or age distribution in leadership teams doesn't change how choices are made throughout the organisation.

At the same time, a *lack* of diversity in leadership positions *throughout* the organisation is *a strong indicator* that expertise remains unidentified and underutilised, that decision making is rampant, that risk is constantly increased, and that organisational performance is consequently suffering.

Lack of diversity is a symptom of a systemic organisational problem which affects all employees, including the privileged

A lack of diversity is thus a symptom of a systemic organisational problem. The organisation is poor at identifying and utilising expertise, preferring to make decisions instead. This affects everyone within the organisation. **Also the expertise of able-bodied heterosexual White men from a stable and good socio-economic background with a degree and experience will remain underutilised.** In these organisations, nobody can escape feeling frustrated at work — for lacking freedom, autonomy, trust and worse.

A lack of diversity also signals *to the outside world* that the organisation doesn't have a culture which embraces talent. That, in all likelihood, it employs many costly mechanisms of control — including many management layers, frequent meetings, and the production of large amounts of information in the form of emails, evaluations and progress reports — to deal with the uncertainty of not knowing whether unidentified experts do the right thing to achieve ambiguous outcomes.

Lack of diversity is a red flag for the outside world

Lack of diversity is a red flag. Both for talent looking for a job — which may see their talent go to waste — and for the outside world considering the use of the organisation's products and services — as lack of diversity is an indicator for poor performance.

Lack of diversity is an organisational call for action to change how it makes decisions. Its bottom line is on the line.

The vicious circle of privilege, talent and experience

Expertise may have no gender, colour, religion, body-type, accent or sexual orientation, but how to recognise it? Who has the potential to become an expert? Identifying and recruiting "talent" is the core-business of HR departments, but what to look out for?

Because of existing social biases, there is a long historic record of "leaders" with a privileged background, having degrees from prestigious universities, benefitting from large networks, and being male and White. This has *de facto* become the face of talent.

Google found that increasing recruitment efforts from 75 to 800 schools also increased diversity. But why did they focus on those 75 schools to begin with? And is there a sound reason to stop at 800?

When HR departments look for talent on the basis of educational credentials and experience, they will harvest privilege. Prestigious schools lack diversity, and the under-privileged lack opportunities to gain experience.

But what is talent to begin with? Who do you want as a leader, someone who graduated from Stanford, or someone who escaped from a POW-camp, twice[1]?

The role of context in identifying (the potential for) expertise

The approach of Decision Free Solutions (DFS) defines an expert as someone able to minimise risk in achieving a particular desired outcome [7]. It argues that expertise is a function of *experience* (how many times someone has been in a similar situation) and *perceptiveness* (how much someone is able to perceive, analyse and learn from a situation).

> Expertise is a function of experience and perceptiveness — the more dynamic the situation, the more important perceptiveness becomes

DFS goes on to argue that the relative importance of either experience and someone's "level of perceptiveness" is determined by context. The more dynamic the environment someone has to succeed in, the more essential a high level of perceptiveness becomes. This holds up for practically all leadership-roles throughout the organisation, as those who take on these roles have to deal with some form of change on a daily basis [8].

To identify talent — someone with the *potential* to be successful in dynamic environments, including leadership-roles — thus *equals* identifying people with a high level of perceptiveness.

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[1] From [6]: [With respect to] the recruitment of people to take on leadership-roles. As an unnamed good-to-great executive stated, "The best hiring decisions often came from people with no industry or business experience. In one case he hired a manager who'd been captured twice during the Second World War and escaped both times. 'I thought that anyone who could do that shouldn't have trouble with business.'"

To identify experience is simple. All it takes is a look at someone's CV. And as long as experience is a requirement ("the more the better"), diversity will be hard to achieve. Experience comes with opportunity, and opportunity comes with the privileged.

But someone's potential to do well in dynamic situations — e.g., someone's talent to succeed in leadership-roles — is not foremost a function of *experience*, but of *level of perceptiveness*. And where experience can be *measured*, someone's level of perceptiveness can't. But it can be *observed*.

Perceptiveness differs from mere observation in that it comes with a type of curiosity. A drive to understand, an innate interest in discovering what is cause and what is effect. Someone with a high level of perceptiveness will more readily identify the interrelatedness of a range of phenomena (of changes in the environment, in behaviours, in the workplace, etc.). This someone will respond differently than someone who fails to connect the dots.

As explained at length in [7], someone's level of perceptiveness logically expresses itself in observable behavioural characteristics. Examples of behavioural characteristics which can be linked to someone's level of perceptiveness — both for those with a very high and a very low level of perceptiveness — are listed in .

Developing new pathways to overcome intersectionality — your help is needed!

At this point, all the elements which (logically) are to result in inclusion and diversity have been discussed:
- Lack of diversity — in the workforce and in leadership-roles throughout the organisation — is a natural outcome when prevalent social biases are given leeway within an organisation.
- Social biases enter organisations whenever choices are made which are not (don't have to be) fully substantiated — e.g., through hierarchical decision making and as often found in rules, protocols, procedures, contracts, etc.
- Organisations can overcome these social biases by creating the conditions to optimally utilise expertise — where expertise has no colour, gender, religion, etc. and is able to substantiate the choices made.
- Lack of diversity is an organisational red flag — it indicates the organisation under-utilises expertise. This not only results in suboptimal organisational performance, it also signals it isn't an attractive employer for any talent (either privileged or underprivileged), and not an attractive partner for other organisations.
- Expertise is a function of someone's experience and someone's level of perceptiveness. The more dynamic a situation, the more important someone's level of perceptiveness becomes.
- Identifying talent — the potential to succeed in dynamic environments, including leadership-roles — translates to identifying someone's "level of perceptiveness". This can't be measured, but it can be observed.

It takes the expertise, energy and motivation of the HR community to develop measures with improve organisational performance and diversity at the same time

HR departments play a pivotal rule in improving organisational performance, and with it improving inclusion and diversity. The logic presented above allows for the development of new, powerful pathways where improving organisational performance goes hand in hand with inclusion and diversity.

Using the guidelines of the approach of DFS — an approach developed to optimally utilise available expertise to achieve desired outcomes [7], see Figure 2 — some pointers to possible measures are provided. These guidelines — four steps (DICE), five principles (TONNNO) and the role of the Decision Free Leader — are to achieve two crucial preconditions for the utilisation of expertise: 1) minimising all forms of decision making (hierarchical, and as found in rules, protocols, procedures, etc.), and 2) the clear communication between experts and experts-in-something-else (to prevent mechanisms of control to "kick in").   Collectively these guidelines are to create a culture (an "environment of no-decision-making") which embraces expertise.

Examples of measures to be taken are provided, but it takes the expertise of the HR community to come up with other and more powerful ones. It also takes the energy and the motivation of the HR community to develop them and try them out in practice.
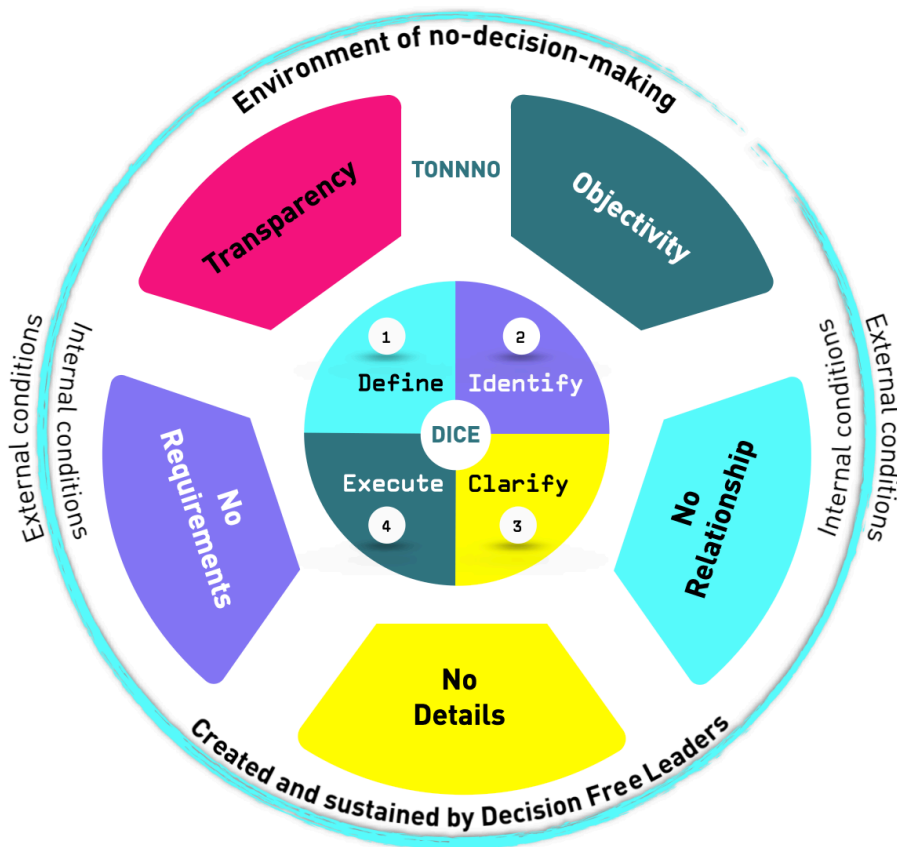

Figure 2. Graphical summary of the guidelines of the approach of Decision Free Solutions (from [7]).

Assessing organisational performance through (lack of) diversity

A high performance organisation is an organisation which optimally utilises the expertise available to it. Such an organisation has non-ambiguous desired outcomes (as is required to be able to identify the required expertise), minimises decision making and ensures communication is clear. Such an organisation can do without most of the traditional mechanisms of control, such as many management layers, an endless string of meetings, and the production and pumping around of large amounts of information.

Organisations which utilise expertise will be quicker to react to changing circumstances. The organisations themselves can be considered highly perceptive. From DFS follows that, as is the case for individuals, also organisations demonstrate observable behavioural characteristics linked to a high or a low level of perceptiveness. They are summarised in Table 2 (from [9]).

As explained, a key indicator for organisational performance is (lack of) diversity. Existing diversity programs may not be designed to achieve a systemic change in how choices are made, but they play a crucial role in understanding the scope of the problem. Without data nothing moves. Without understanding why people leave an organisation any progress will be slow.

HR departments can develop **a range of organisational performance indicators** which are not based on financial outcomes — which often rely on a range of factors the organisation has little influence on — but on data related to diversity and key behavioural characteristics as found in Table 2. Tracking these organisational performance indicators over time allows to determine whether any measures put in place yes/no improve organisational performance and, with it, inclusion.

Identifying a high level of perceptiveness

Identifying and recruiting talent is the core-business of HR departments. From DFS follows that:
- To identify expertise a non-ambiguous desired outcome is to be defined.
- To determine the relative importance of experience and someone's level of perceptiveness, the context in which this desired outcome is to be achieved must be defined as well.
- To identify "talent" for succeeding in dynamic environments (including leadership-roles), someone's level of perceptiveness is to be assessed.

When asked to identify talent, HR departments can develop several measures:
- For any given position in the organisation it shall be determined what the desired outcome is this position is to contribute to.
- For any given position in the organisation it shall be assessed to what extent the environment may be considered dynamic. The more dynamic, the greater the importance of someone's level of perceptiveness.
- When recruiting expertise for a given position in the organisation, the TONNNO-principles of "No details," "No requirements." and "No relationship" apply . Based on the desired outcome and context, an applicant should be able to substantiate why he/she is a good candidate. Details complicate the communication, requirements (e.g., years of experience, familiarity with certain software) may needless turn viable candidates away, and relationships tend to bypass the talent identification process altogether.

- When experience is not vital — or can be gained on the job — no experience-related requirements are to be listed as a selection criterium: they favour the privileged.
- Generally, when experience is deemed pivotal, or when in need of a specialist, the organisation can't help but recruit what is available. But this may simply mean that, in these situations, HR departments have to be much more *pro-active* in hiring those with a high level of perceptiveness *early on*, to allow them to gain this experience within the organisation.
- Identifying people with a high level of perceptiveness (as opposed to experience and educational credentials) requires a new approach to hiring. This may include requesting that applicants detail not just degrees and experience, but examples of evidence in line with a high level of perceptiveness (as can be found in Table 1). It is key that this is required *prior* to making a first selection of candidates. This to avoid social biases affecting this pre-selection.
- For those asked to come for an interview, new assessment procedures focussing on "unearthing" perceptiveness may be developed.
- Identifying a high level of perceptiveness for those already in the organisation — e.g., for internal promotions to leadership-roles — is much easier. Colleagues are perfectly positioned to observe the absence or presence of behavioural characteristics as listed in Table 1. Feedback or assessment programs which collect relevant data on a regular basis may be a goldmine in this respect.

Minimising decision making within the HR department

Decision making increases risk and allows social biases to take hold in the organisation. Decision making is to be overcome to utilise expertise and so improve organisational performance and diversity.

HR departments don't "run" the organisation, but they can make vital contributions to organisational performance and diversity in various ways:
- By tracking performance indicators
- By offering training/education on how social biases enter organisations
- By "scoring" perceptiveness as part of feedback/assessment sessions
- By requesting the assessment of environment of certain roles (static/dynamic)
- By minimising all types of decision making related to the HR department itself (lead by example!):
  - By avoiding listing non-essential requirements in job descriptions (both internal and external), especially with respect to experience and educational credentials
  - By avoiding the *unsubstantiated* use of rules, protocols, procedures etc. throughout the organisation (to what aim are rules etc. defined, and what is the evidence the rule in place will contribute to this aim?)
  - By defining non-ambiguous desired outcomes for all/key HR-related activities and responsibilities
  - By replacing "managing by decision making" with "managing by approval" (see also [9])

A new role for HR departments?

Organisations who manage to optimally utilise available expertise are, by definition, *human centric* organisations. This article proposes that *Human Resource* departments are perfectly positioned to take on a much more pivotal and impactful role in organisations than "merely" managing the employee life cycle and administering employee benefits.

HR departments can be, and in the author's view should be, drivers for organisational performance. It is the quickest road to do away with the grievances of racism and discrimination, and achieve inclusion and diversity instead.

If you'd like to share ideas, make suggestions, provide pointers or request more information, the author can be contacted at jorn@decisionfreesolutions.com.

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PERCEIVER			
No decision making	**No control and influence**	**Steadiness**	**Caring**
Conditions and universal rules determine outcome: utilise everyone's expertise	Understands outcome depends on conditions and can't be forced	Not easily surprised, accepts reality, doesn't feel threatened	Aware of interrelatedness role of environment, own responsibility to contribute
• Always aiming for transparency • Identifies decisions as risk • Approver and enabler • Embraces meritocracy • Focus on goal to be achieved • Doesn't micro-manage • Has overview • Welcomes support • Encourages creativity	• Doesn't try to persuade • Focus on identification of others' skills and talents • Focus on alignment • Accepts reality • Humble • Never blames individual • Results are produced by culture/entire team • Avoids dogged pursuit of unattainable goals	• Approachable • Doesn't compete • Doesn't abuse or discriminate • Responsible • Respectful • Honest • Informal • Thoughtful • Quiet • Communicates directly • Communicates openly	• Will make others feel at ease • Interested in the whole person • Achieves work-life balance • Volunteers • Compassionate • Patient • Supportive • Trustworthy • Good listener
NON-PERCEIVER			
Decision making	**Control and influence**	**Erratic and emotional**	**Lack of caring**
Conditions and universal rules are poorly perceived, event's outcome unclear	Fails to see outcome is pre-determined by conditions and universal rules	Lack of understanding, surprised by behaviour and outcome, insecure	Fails to see interrelatedness, disregard for role of environment, not part of
• Likes decision making • Belief in "gut instinct" • Feels no need to explain decisions • Does not mind contradicting oneself • Does not prepare for meetings • Quick to make up excuses • Likes to talk instead of listen • Strictly adheres to hierarchy • Unable to change	• Preference for rules, protocols and contracts • Values relationships and loyalty over expertise • Links performance to the individual • Readily apportions blame and praise • Belief in incentives • Greatly values hierarchy, authority and prestige • Disregard for truth • Uses information strategically; hidden agenda	• Displays abusive behaviour • Cause of stress for those around • Sees everything as win-lose • Sees colleagues as competitors • Never responsible when things go wrong • Self-centred • Boastful • Opportunistic • Easily hurt/feel threatened	• Focus on self (as opposed to e.g. family) • No volunteering work that requires effort • Unable to take other people's perspective • No interest in other people's problems • Not moved by other people's fate • Focus on wealth as measure of self-worth • Belief that people get what they deserve

Table 1: Overview of behavioural characteristics correlated with having a very high (Perceiver) or very low (Non-perceiver) level of perceptiveness. From [8].

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Characteristics of a PERCEIVING (expert) organisation			
No decision making	**No control and influence**	**Steadiness**	**Caring**
Conditions and universal rules determine outcome: utilise everyone's expertise	Understands outcome depends on conditions and can't be forced	Not easily surprised, accepts reality, safe environment	Aware of interrelatedness with environment, own responsibility to contribute
• Loose or nearly absent hierarchy • Relatively few but well prepared meetings • Quick to respond • Issues get resolved quickly • Measure performances • Everyone shares sense of responsibility • Quality assurance instead of control	• Few rules and protocols • Few staff functions, staff functions have supportive role • Minimises the use of contracts • Facilitates work-life balance • Recognises performance is always collective • No-blame culture	• Low employee turnover • Few to no complaints of racism and discrimination • Informal culture • Easy access to leadership • Open communication • Not prone to litigate • Relatively high job-security	• Has clear vision and mission providing context for organisational purpose • Organisational purpose/mission/vision resolves frustrations • Uses profits to pursue organisational purpose • Interest of client is interest of organisation • Shares lessons learned
Characteristics of a NON-PERCEIVING (non-expert) organisation			
Decision making	**Control and influence**	**Erratic and emotional**	**Lack of caring**
Conditions and universal rules are poorly perceived, event's outcome unclear	Fails to see outcome is pre-determined by conditions and universal rules	Lack of understanding, surprised by development and outcomes	Sees organisation in isolation, as competing with outside world
• Strictly hierarchical • Many management layers • Long response times • Frequent and poorly prepared meetings • Meetings have lots of participants • Issues don't get resolved without 'decision maker' • Produce lots of internal information/communication • Large marketing/PR expenditures	• Many rules, protocols and contracts • Lots of internal control and inspection • Many formal staff functions producing directives • Reliance on complex legal contracts • Use of individual bonuses and other (financial) incentives • Long work weeks are the norm	• Quick to litigate • Culture perpetuates societal biases • Internal conflicts don't always get resolved • Internal competition for resources • Unclear who is responsible • Unpredictable company politics • High employee turnover • High sick leave • Frequent reorganisations	• No or unclear vision and mission • Sees profit as organisational purpose • Focus on short-term performance and developments • Little interest in (long-term relationships with) clients • Win-lose mentality • No clear strategy • Limits flow of information, both in- and externally

Table 2: Overview of organisational characteristics correlated with utilising a lot (Perceiving) or little (Non-perceiving) expertise in pursuing its organisational goals (from [9]).

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