"Soup or Salad" – Models of Diversity

AVRAHAM POUPKO, L&T Technology Services

Diversity is a multi-faceted and overloaded word. In this experience report I describe some of my own experiences with diversity along with some insights and musings. One of my main points is that diversity is great, but we need to go beyond the accepted types of diversity and find new (and diverse) ways of being diverse.

1. INTRODUCTION

We all value diversity. We all want diversity. Look at any presentation, given by any manager, and of course one of the values you will see there is: "build diverse teams", or something similar. I too believe in diversity, and am part of a rather diverse group of people. For the last 25 years I have been working for companies that in one form or another champion diversity as one of their core values. They constantly and consistently say that diversity is the right thing to pursue and a valuable thing to cultivate

Over the years, I have been asking myself: Are those values indeed values I can identify with? Is diversity really valuable? What kind of value does diversity bring? Are there limits to diversity? Can a team be too diverse?

In this experience report, I would like to describe some of the modes of diversity I have encountered over the years. And in what way they worked for me, and in what ways not so. I recognize that some the ideas in this paper are highly subjective. That is due in part to the somewhat controversial nature of diversity.

2. THE POWER OF DIVERSITY – A STORY

When can we say that software works "correctly"? There are several views on the matter. The difference between them is subtle, but can be significant.

There is a point of view that says that when the customer (or proxy thereof) sees what the software does and expresses satisfaction, then we can say that the software is "performing correctly". There is another view that we only say that software performs correctly when it meets the business need that it was created to address.

What do we do when the customer expresses a certain desire for software, but we know that is not what the customer really "needs"? We know that the customer is mistaken and misguided. Do we give the customer what (we think) they really need? Or do we give them what they say they need.

We had exactly such a case in our team. The system had the routine behavior that all agreed upon. The debate started when it came to the exceptional behavior. The customer demanded that under the exception of "insufficient resources", the system behave in a certain way. However there were many of us on the team that knew that once the system behaves in that way, the interaction between humans and the system will be such that the system will not be able to recover and the problem will be exacerbated. During the internal meetings where we debated this, one group voiced the opinion that we must deliver what the customer wants. That is what our mandate is, and that is what we must do. We are not smarter than the customer, and once we made our opinions clear, it was up to the customer to decide what they wanted. There was another strong voice that said that our responsibility is to deliver what the customer really needs, and not what the customer thinks they need.

Fortunately for us, we had on our team people from different backgrounds, so that as a team we were able to truly present and understand both sides of the argument. There was one team member that came from a very open minded and "relativistic" background. He was able to give voice to the opinion that says that every person really knows what is best for them. We can argue and educate others, but ultimately it is paternalistic and condescending to think that we know better than someone else what is good for them. He made the strong argument that once we have made it clear to the customer what we think should be done, we have done our job. If we have not convinced the customer, we must deliver what the customer wants.

There were other team members that came from very traditional and conservative cultures, and had a strong belief that there are rights and wrongs, that have been distilled by years of tradition, and that there are certain things that are plain wrong even if the individuals themselves think that they are right.

What started out as an argument as to how to handle a stubborn customer evolved into a discussion or dialogue as to the very nature of right and wrong. People on both sides of the debate were able to bring rhetorical arguments to support their position. The ultimate solution was actually one in which under the exception conditions, the system behaved exactly as the customer had originally requested, but the message presented to the user was modified so as to discourage (but not disable) retries. Thus even though the system behaved as the customer had (wrongly) requested, we were able to define a behavior that reduced the severity of the problem.

3.   DIVERSE TEAMS

A few years ago, I started building my current team, of architects and senior developers. I was looking for certain skills and attitudes. In addition to the particular skills and experience I was looking for, I was also looking for people that had positive energy, and a can-do attitude.

While diversity has always been a priority in the company I work for (at least as a buzzword), I did not explicitly define "diversity" as one of the criteria for recruiting. Nonetheless, as I was interviewing and hiring, I started noticing the differences that I thought would make for a diverse team that would be able to work well together, yet challenge each other, and provide healthy tension. This diversity was not along the traditional lines of diversity such as gender or race, rather diversity in perspective and attitude. In parallel to the team taking shape, my own ideas about diversity started taking new shape as well.

3.1   Types of diversity

For my entire professional career, diversity has always been a value to me and the companies I work for. I notice two main reasons for a team to be diverse.
1.   It is the right thing from a social perspective.
2.   It is the right thing from a utilitarian perspective.
Of course, I have often seen the two confused (deliberately or unwittingly).

3.2   Diversity is the right thing

There are certain values we believe in beyond the business value they bring. We might believe in telling the truth, or being loyal to our families. We might believe in being patriotic or cosmopolitan and so forth. As individuals and as societies we will sometimes adhere to those values, even if they bring no or even negative business value. We adhere to them because as human beings they enrich our lives. Some of these values might even be subject to controversy. The debates and arguments about these values often cannot be resolved by data, rather they are resolved by moral and social arguments.

For example, XP states as one of its values: "We will tell the truth about progress and estimates." One might argue that we only tell the truth when it makes good business sense to so do. But the word and spirit of XP is to always tell the truth about price and estimates even when there is a price to pay. Not only because in the long run trust brings value, but also because it is the right thing to do.

Much of our commitment to diversity is motivated by our value position. Some of us feel that there might have been a historical or political wrong towards a particular gender or minority and that it is our responsibility as fellow humans to be inclusive and diverse in order to right that wrong. We feel that not only should we be diverse, but that everyone should be diverse. We are often willing to pay a real price in order to be diverse.

3.3   Diversity is the smart thing

In addition to that, there is sometimes real business value in diversity. This is value in the form of more diverse thinking and interacting.
And of course sometimes we can confuse the two types of diversity and mislabel them.
We can be diverse in the *value* sense of the word, but rather than acknowledge that is what we are doing, we will claim that we are reaping business benefits of being diverse.
There are many reasons to do that. One of the reasons is that it allows us to avoid the above mentioned controversy.

I know that from a corporate point of view there are often no values other than the business value. So when a corporation says that we value things such as being environmentally responsible, encourage a life-work balance or being diverse, I am quite cynical, and I suspect that the only value is a corporate image or something

similar, and that the corporation is adopting those values that they are expected by others to adopt. Nonetheless, I still feel comfortable talking about those values because the individuals in the corporation are indeed real people with real values.

My personal belief is that diversity is often the right thing, and it often (but not always) does indeed bring business value. I also believe that it is important to understand the benefits of diversity so that we can better focus our diversity efforts.

So, being that diversity is the right thing, and being that many people think that it is the right thing. And given the fact that people are more productive working in an environment that adopts their personal beliefs, diversity brings business value.

As a matter of fact, XP explicitly states that, "[XP is] a way to work in harmony with your personal and corporate values". (http://www.extremeprogramming.org/values.html). If diversity is one of your personal values, then XP adopts it.

Now we come to the agile part. Agile is about communication. The communication that takes place between people. And rich communication always takes place within some sort of cultural context. A very significant part of what we call our "work environment" is a cultural environment. We create friendships and alliances and these are important to our effective communication. And as such, we are more at home when surrounded by people that share at least some our values. If diversity is one of those values that we need, then we surround ourselves by people likewise committed to diversity. That will allow us to feel "at home" and be more productive.

While I strongly agree with the paragraph above (after all, I wrote it), it contains a logical flaw. I call it "the paradox of diversity."

The paradox is as follows: I thrive in a culture when surrounded by people that share my values, one of those values is diversity, so consequently I need to be surrounded by people that believe in at that are committed to diversity. But diversity might mean sharing the world with people that share values different from my own. If we are diverse in accepting people of different race, gender, orientation and so forth, but we only welcome people that share our values, then maybe we are not truly diverse. Perhaps we should be diverse enough to accept people that do not see value in diversity, at least not the way we see it. If I say, "I am open to accept any kind of person as long as they are diverse and open minded the way I am," can I really claim to be diverse? I sometimes use the term "Meta Diverse" to mean that not only is a person or a group diverse, but they are diverse in the way they see diversity itself. If a diverse group only accepts people that are diverse the way they are, I would not call them "Meta Diverse."

3.4   Story - "I am open minded, but only to open minded people"

This attitude, of being open minded only to similarly open minded people, is quite common, and can actually be detrimental to communication.

Let me share the following experience. We once had a large group of managers that were participating in a communication workshop. We came from all over the world to learn how to be more effective communicators. The topic of diversity came up, and it became obvious that some of the participants consider themselves to be quite inclusive and diverse. They proudly told the rest of the group that they come from very open-minded cultures that celebrate diversity. There were others that did not make such claims.

During the workshop we went through an exercise called "controlled dissent.." This is an exercise that takes the trainees out of their comfort zone and forces them to confront strong disagreement and criticism. I suggested to the moderator of the course that a rather junior person be put in the role of the dissenter. I felt that there were too many conventions that had been established, and that a more experience dissenter would unconsciously adhere to them.

At my suggestion, Sara, who is a very bright, unconventional, and opinionated thinker was put in the role of the dissenter. As expected, she had some opinions about all sort of things that were not in line with the mainstream opinion. The interesting part was that her dissent was not along the usual lines of disagreement; rather she had opinions that were not in agreement with some deep values and beliefs help by the more senior members. Some of those turned out to be quite sensitive. . For example, she felt that real world experience with a particular system gives one more authority than formal training or seniority does, and as such her voice should carry more weight. She also strongly felt that the more senior one is, the more likely they are to be wrong as they have "invested" more in their position. She said that we should listen to the person that has less to lose, as the person that has more to lose will have a harder time being objective. Not only did she have different opinions,

she was being rather vocal and adamant about it. It became very obvious that in her "role" as dissenter, she was actually being her true self.

At the beginning of the exercise, she was told that she was free to speak her mind and that the success of the exercise depended on free expression. Yet, as she went on the self-proclaimed open-minded managers became more and more upset. To the point where one of our directors blurted: "Do you think that we need to come here to listen to Sara's ideas about how to run a multimillion dollar company?!" and, "Why should we listen to her if she is not willing to listen to us?" Danny is a rather senior manager who claims to be inclusive and open to other ideas, but once he perceived Sara to be both wrong and close-minded, he became close-minded as well. He explicitly stated that he could only be open-minded to other likewise open-minded people.

I do not think that Sara was being close-minded. I think that she had strong opinions about things and was passionate about those things. She did not agree with certain dogmas, and refused to yield to seniority. We desperately need people like that, and we need their voices to be heard. The worst thing we can do is to force those people into our form of thinking. We will lose some very important perspectives.

In the above story we see how not only is Daniel untrue to his stated value of being inclusive and committed to diversity, but he is actually losing the business value that diversity can bring. The call here is to leaders and managers. Encourage people to think differently even about issues that you consider sensitive or taboo, even about issues that make you feel uncomfortable. Strong, divergent, and very passionate disagreement can be highly productive.

3.5   Can diversity make us more agile?

Our workplaces are complicated and even complex. It order to make sense of the complicated world we live in, we need multiple perspectives on things. That means that we must have people with different points of view taking part in the discussion. Diversity can indeed achieve that, but only the right kind of diversity. Often when we talk about diversity, we mean diversity in gender, race, country of origin and so forth. But having people of different races does not give you a multi perspective view of things unless those people also have different experience and world view. Having people from different races that all think the same way will not create a diverse team.

In her essay on diversity, "The Two Sides of Teams" (http://www.leanessays.com/2016/09/the-two-sides-of-teams.html), Mary Poppendieck states that, "There is no advantage in diversity on a team if those who are in the minority – those who are different or soft-spoken or are working in their second language – do not feel comfortable about sharing their unique perspective." I would go even farther and say that there is no advantage to diversity of race, gender, country of origin or any other kind unless in brings with it *diversity of thought*. If you have people from different races that all think the same or worse yet, have all been conditioned to think the same, than you are not getting the benefits that diversity offers.

True, many of the accepted parameters of diversity are indeed proxies for real diversity in thinking, but not all of them.

I would like to propose a different approach to diversity. A mixture of people that can really feed a provocative and open discussion. Maybe if we had a group comprised of open-minded people and closed-minded people. A group that has people that believe in a more socialistic financial system and people that believe in capitalism. People that have been educated in formal institutions and people that are self educated. Maybe then we can have a real diverse team that can come up with a deeper understanding of complex problems.

3.6   How diversity allowed us to solve a complex problem

I was once working on a project with my good friend Kuldeep. Kuldeep and I have worked together on many projects. We love working together and there is a deep trust between us. We have very different cultural backgrounds that we cherish and are proud of. One of our differences is in how to treat very senior people. I am Israeli, and our culture puts a premium on "directness". We believe that if someone is wrong, then the kindest thing you can do is tell them that they are wrong. Do not try to make it look any different or any better than it is. And that will gain you the respect of the senior person. If he is not capable of handling direct and honest truths, then he does not belong in his position in the first place. Kuldeep, on the other hand, comes from a culture that believes that corporate hierarchy needs to be respected. One way of respecting senior people is by not telling them outright that they are wrong. If you do confront them directly, they might see that as disrespectful.

Kuldeep and I were working closely with the CTO of a large company. This CTO had made a mistake that had caused some damage, and if followed upon would cause more damage. It was time to get this CTO to issue a new directive, so that our project could get back on track with minimal loss. I was of the opinion that we should give him a call and tell him that his original directive was wrong and that it needs to be fixed, the sooner the better. I

knew that the CTO does not like to be wrong, but considering the stakes, I was sure that he would acquiesce. I felt that by telling him that he was wrong in the most direct way, we would show him that we actually respect him. Kuldeep strongly felt that you do not show respect by telling someone how wrong they are. You show respect by showing respect. Kuldeep and I were able to have a very mature and fascinating conversation about what the nature of respect really is. At our next meeting, Kuldeep told the CTO how deeply insightful his original idea had been, but that some factors that we had thought were not significant turned out to be quite significant and that we should reconsider our strategy. Given the momentum that the original memo had generated, only a proper memo from the CTO acknowledging the significance of these changes could help us get back on track. At first I was incredulous. What value is there to calling a silly idea "deeply insightful," and why would any CTO fall for what was obviously a ploy? But the CTO did listen to Kuldeep. And Kuldeep explained to me that it is only a ploy if you are cynical and do not respect the person. But if you are sincere and really do respect the seniority of the person you are dealing with, there is nothing wrong in telling him that he has a good idea that just needs to be changed.

3.7   The Agile Community

Is it reasonable to talk about diversity in the "agile community?" One might argue that the agile community is just a group of people, and each person has their own ideas of diversity. Nonetheless, I think that we can talk about the agile community's approach to diversity as a community. And indeed the community has been talking about diversity as a positive value. But as always there is room for improvement.

In my experience, the agile community is comprised by and large of software professionals. There is some contact with other industries, but we need much more. There is a lot to learn from other disciplines such as education, manufacturing, healthcare, and so forth. Whenever we have a policeman, a dancer, a professor of ancient languages or social activist as a keynote speaker in an agile conference, we express how much we can learn from them. Let's have more of that.

3.8   Musings - "Soup" or "Salad"

In the past when I talked about models of diversity, I would use the terms "Homogeneous" vs "Heterogeneous." Over time I found that these terms are sometimes confusing and not clear enough. A metaphor I find useful is "Soup vs. Salad."

Both soup and salad can be great foods, but they are different. Very different.

If you have a mix of ingredients, and do not want any ingredient to stick out too much, if you are hesitant to try new culinary experiences, you are probably better off with the soup. Likewise, if you are a bit vulnerable today (say you have the flu), I suggest that you go for the soup. But if you have a robust gut and an adventuresome palate, if you believe that different flavors, smells, colors and textures can each keep their own identity and yet combine to give a delightful experience – then you should go for the salad.

In order to truly get the benefits of diversity, we need to use the Salad model. Do not force people to conform to some dishwater grey average. That does not give you diversity. That just gives you an average team. Allow and encourage each person and each team member to retain their own unique perspective, and celebrate the salad of perspectives.

In the story above, Kuldeep and I did not try to find an average or compromise between respecting seniority and being direct. Rather, we worked together to find an approach that worked. And in general, when you have a diverse team you need to work hard to ensure that people keep their diverse outlooks. If you notice a convergence to some medium or average, it is time to inject some new diversity into the team.

3.9   Suggested types of diversity

An important point to make is this: There are certain types of diversity that have become socially acceptable. Many people that strive to be diverse will become diverse along accepted lines. I suggest that instead we become "Meta Diversive." That is, we should try to find new types of diversity that are not normally accepted as being considered "diverse." Admittedly, this is hard. It is much easier to be diverse along ethnic or gender lines as these are easily recognized, but these new types of diversity might be more rewarding.

Age. People of different ages often have widely varying world views. Have some young (possibly immature) and some old and seasoned people on your team. Respect youth and respect tenure. You will be amazed at how differently these people think about things.

Gender issues. Having a diverse team with different opinions on gender roles, the role of marriage, and the role of family can really provoke interesting and constructive discussion. Remember, not everyone has to be open-minded the same way you are.

Different family styles. People that have grown up in or raised different types of families often have highly divergent perspectives on how to manage conflict and how we communicate with other people that we do not agree with. Having a mixture of such perspectives can truly enhance our experience.

People that like writing vs. people that like talking. "Teachers" vs. "Authors". A big part of what we do as software professionals is communicate. Having a group of people that are able to express themselves in different ways is extremely valuable. "Teachers" are great at assessing the audience and communicating complex ideas verbally. They know how to look at someone and know whether they understand what they are being told or not. They know how to solicit questions and to answer them. "Authors" on the other hand, are masters of written language and of "one way" communication. They know how to imagine an audience that is not here, and communicate in a way that is clear. Just as important, teachers and authors have very different ideas on what knowledge is, on the difference between "knowledge" and "information", and how the two are created and shared. Having these different skills and outlooks in your team makes for a group that is able to effectively communicate.

3.10 Can we be too diverse?

Of course! We need to have a common culture that acts as a glue, and holds us together. Once that is lost, we lose our team identity and find it hard to function. It is the responsibility of management to always recognize the group's capacity for new thinking and slowly introduce new people and new types of people. If we find that the group is too diverse, give the group some time to refind its group identity (this might not happen on its own. This might need some facilitation.) Once the culture stabilizes, we are ready for more diversity.

3.11 Diversity does not mean that everyone gets an equal vote

Diversity means that we have a multitude of opinions and perspectives. It does not mean everyone gets "veto rights" when they do not like something we are doing, or when something goes against their values. We all know of stories where the multitude of opinions and approaches end up paralyzing the team. That should not happen. It is always critical to have people with knowledge and authority to take perspective into consideration and arrive at decisions. Technical and business decisions cannot always be made based on consensus of on popular vote.

4. SUMMARY AND SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Diversity is a complex topic. Too much diversity and you lose any unifying glue that can hold your group together. Too little diversity, and you are fall into the trap of "group think". If you want to really reap the rewards of diversity, try to find those unconventional lines of diversity.

Over the years I have found being exposed to diversity to be extremely rewarding, both professionally and personally. It is through the eyes of others that I am able to learn and understand the world. Meeting and interacting with all these people, has made me into a much more effective communicator. As a team member and as an individual, I am much better equipped to communicate complex and intricate material.

I urge you to embrace "meta diversity". Try to group up with people that have different ideas about what diversity is and what are its limits. That is where the real surprises lie. If you find someone that pushes your limits of tolerance, or that does not see diversity the way you do - seize the opportunity. You might discover something new.

Remember the difference between disagreement and disrespect. It is OK to disagree with someone and to be to vocal and adamant about it. But that does not have to mean that you disrespect them. If you respect the opinion you do not agree with, you can learn a great deal from it. Conversely, diversity without respect is not very valuable. You can't join someone in a journey of learning if you do not believe they have something substantial to offer you.

Take care not to fall into the trap of diversity based on quotas. If you find that you are being diverse just to fill a certain quota, as in "we should really have more of x", you might be aiming for the wrong kind of diversity.

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