When you put your employees’ differences to work, your company wins.

New sections to guide you through the article:
• The Idea in Brief
• The Idea at Work
• Exploring Further...
You know that workforce diversity is smart business: It opens markets, lifts morale, and enhances productivity. So why do most diversity initiatives backfire—heightening tensions and hindering corporate performance?

Many of us simply hire employees with diverse backgrounds—then await the payoff. We don’t enable employees’ differences to transform how our organization does work.

When employees use their differences to shape new goals, processes, leadership approaches, and teams, they bring more of themselves to work. They feel more committed to their jobs—and their companies grow.

How to activate this virtuous cycle? Transcend two existing diversity paradigms: assimilation (“we’re all the same”) or differentiation (“we celebrate differences”). Adopt a new paradigm—integration—that enables employees’ differences to matter.

### THE IDEA AT WORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assimilation Paradigm</th>
<th>Differentiation Paradigm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Premise</strong></td>
<td>“We’re all the same.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td>Hire diverse employees; encourage uniform behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantage</strong></td>
<td>Promotes fair hiring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
<td>Subverting differences to encourage harmony, companies miss out on new ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling detached from their work, employees’ underperform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td>At a consulting company emphasizing quantitative analysis, minority managers encounter skepticism when they suggest interviewing clients. Labeling the incident as racial discord, the firm doesn’t explore the potentially valuable new consulting approach.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The Integration Paradigm

The integration paradigm transcends assimilation and differentiation—promoting equal opportunity and valuing cultural differences. Result? Employees’ diverse perspectives positively impact companies’ work.

**Example:**
A public-interest law firm’s all-white staff’s clients are exclusively white. It hires female attorneys of color, who encourage it to pursue litigation challenging English-only policies. Since such cases didn’t fall under traditional affirmative-action work, the firm had ignored them. By taking them, it begins serving more women—immigrants—and enhances the quality of its work. The attorneys of color feel valued, and the firm attracts competent, diverse staff.

### Additional suggestions for achieving integration:

1. **Encourage open discussion of cultural backgrounds.**

   **Example:**
   A food company’s Chinese chemist draws on her cooking—not her scientific—experience to solve a soup-flavoring problem. But to fit in, she avoids sharing the real source of her inspiration with her colleagues—all white men. Open discussion of cultural differences would engage her more fully in work and workplace relationships.

2. **Eliminate all forms of dominance (by hierarchy, function, race, gender, etc.) that inhibit full contribution.** When one firm opened its annual strategy conference to people from all hierarchy levels, everyone knew their contributions were valued.

3. **Secure organizational trust.** In diverse workforces, people share more feelings and ideas. Tensions naturally arise. Demonstrate your commitment to diversity by acknowledging tensions—and resolving them swiftly.