

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA? MANAGING DIVERSITY

Forget the PC overtones – diversity really does need to be managed. But what kind of diversity and who's to manage it – more white men in blue shirts? The topic is, of course, code for race and gender. 'Race' is often literally only skin deep; at other times it encodes ethnic awareness and cultural values. Gender is a more reliable and less compromising set of biological and socially constructed differences, recognised as hugely important in how we can better work together. Yet it's the related aspects of our differences – personality, skill, experience, knowledge – which when combined effectively offer the magic prize of synergy; all of us are better than any of us. But this takes time and can exact huge transaction costs of finding out how to exchange and learn from each other without coming to blows. Hence the need for 'managing' diversity. In an ideal world – and your average authentic village – diversity is self-managed. Alas, in the modern corporation, the white men in blue shirts will appoint a diversity officer to help the village to be productive. Two cheers for that. Nigel Nicholson is professor of organisational behaviour at the London Business School



David Humphries