

# Social Cohesion vs Diversity

There is often an inverse correlation between perceived social cohesion and perceived diversity, but publicly funded organisations strive to mobilise the benefits of both: social cohesion for teamwork and solidarity; and diversity to foster new ideas and innovation. Too much diversity of opinion can paralyse action and lead to unhealthy conflict, while cohesive tribes can trap people in comfortable, but narrow and limiting little boxes.

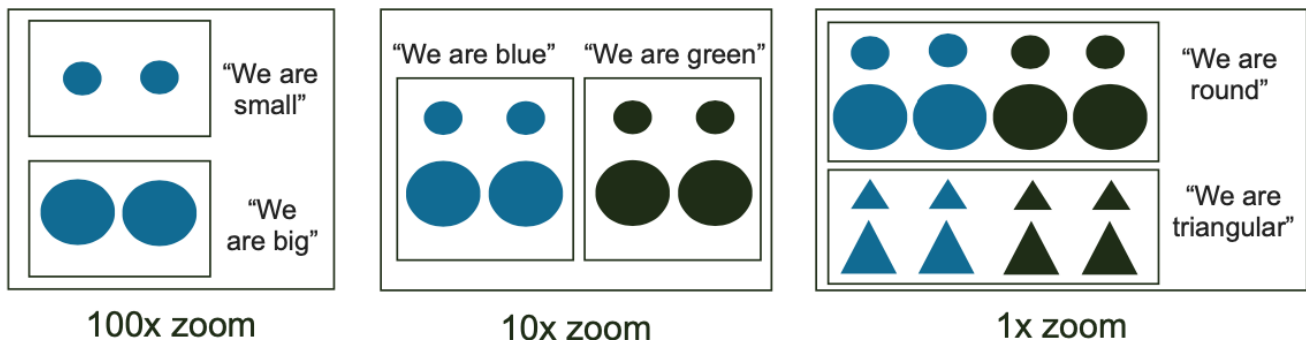
Humans tend to feel more comfortable with people who have similar values or perspectives to their own. Perceived similarities are easy, dependable foundations for trust, reciprocity, and a sense of 'us'. Value-driven workers in publicly funded organisations, especially larger organisations, are prone to dividing themselves into small tribes. This is exacerbated by being sorted into teams based largely on similarities in training, skills, functions, or services.

It takes time and effort to engage people with different points of view, and to synthesise different perspectives into collective action. People in publicly funded organisations are often so busy delivering services within constrained resources that they rely on the shorthand of shared experience to get their jobs done.

Similar points of view promote social cohesion within groups, including collaboration, trust, and a sense of belonging, but too much similarity can contribute to groupthink or defensive 'us vs them' attitudes. Strong group norms can stifle innovation, exclude new ideas, and waste energy competing instead of collaborating with 'outsiders' who may share some similar aims.

More diversity gives access to more perspectives, experiences, and ideas, but too much tolerance for diversity can be paralyzing, disruptive, and inefficient. Diversity of opinion and values can undermine teamwork and invite seemingly endless debate and disagreement. It is hard to maintain peak productivity in teams with too many opinions, where every decision leaves someone feeling unsatisfied and excluded.

### perceived difference is a function of the boxes we sort ourselves into



Groups can manage more diversity without sacrificing cohesion by deliberately identifying and emphasising commonalities, not just differences between people.

Redefining group membership into boxes that are relevant to an issue, rather than letting people default into their familiar camps, helps to break down traditional divisions. Redrawing the boundaries of a debate can help people to see old rivals as new allies.

It is tempting to take any points of agreement as given and focus more energy on thrashing out differences, but take a little time first to highlight common ground and shared goals. Zooming out to a shared starting point where the parties agree in principle encourages empathy and collaborative problem solving, rather than competitive advocacy and argument.

It takes some effort to strike the right balance between cohesion and diversity, but the benefits can outweigh the costs. Zooming out to focus first on what we share with perceived 'others' gives access to more ideas and innovative solutions to shared problems.

Harness energy for collaboration with broadly defined allies, instead of wasting energy competing over details with broadly defined opponents. Framing detailed work around shared principles and goals focuses discussion and stimulates action, rather than frustrating and inefficient cycles of endless debate.

Encouraging people to sort themselves into more inclusive boxes takes time and effort, but makes room for more people to help identify and solve bigger problems by thinking outside their comfortable boxes.