

## How Different Is Too Different?

by Mike Hawkins  
[mike@alpinelink.com](mailto:mike@alpinelink.com)



Opposites attract because people are pulled like a magnet to traits that are refreshingly different from their own. But those differences often become the source of disagreement. Studies find that while people are intrigued and attracted to others dissimilar to themselves that over time opposites don't stay together. Whether personal or professional, diversity is good, but only to a point. Having teams, friends, and spouses with differing perspectives and capabilities can be synergistic, but also a source of conflict.

They met at work. They each filled an unmet need in the other. It took a while, but eventually the differences became obvious. She was an introvert, so much so that she would keep concerns to herself to the point that when she finally spoke up she blew up. He was an extrovert, so much so that he would befriend strangers and embarrass her as a result. She was detail oriented, to the point that she would make big issues out of what he considered small ones. He was big picture oriented, so much so that he would ignore small things that were important to her. She thought with her heart and her decisions were largely driven by emotion. He thought with his head and would even apply structure to matters involving people. She was short-term oriented and procrastinated incessantly. He was long-term oriented and would plan events months ahead of time. She was dependent, but longed for independence. He felt called to be the leader of his family which she interpreted as being controlling. The only reason their marriage lasted 27 years was because both were committed to making their marriage work, but the differences finally became too much.

Relationships with coworkers and employees are no different. Teams made of people with diverse personalities, experiences, and styles only last as long as the people stay committed to the team. When the team commitment is gone, so goes the collaboration. Differences of opinion are good only to the extent they enable decision making for the good of the team and the differences don't cross the line from being constructive to destructive.

The advantages of having teams with differing perspectives, skills, and knowledge are well known. However, be careful about hiring people, joining teams, partnering, investing in, or committing to long-term relationships with people who are vastly different. While the temptation may be to offset a weakness, or fill a void, there needs to be enough commonality that people can respect each other and coexist.

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To maintain as much harmony in relationships as possible, whether at work or home:

- Select employees, partners, friends, investors, and mates who share common beliefs, values, and motives.
- Discuss and agree on desired outcomes in enough detail that they can be measured.
- Discuss, understand, and promote the value of being together versus being apart.
- Discuss each other's differences in enough detail that you understand them, respect them, and know how to use them.
- Agree on guiding principles that leverage the differences but within agreed upon boundaries.
- Communicate clearly, deeply, and often. When listening, empathize. Seek to understand before speaking.
- Don't major on the minors. Ignore small differences and issues of little consequence.
- Reach compromises that all parties can live with.
- Strive to continually learn and grow together. Engage in new experiences and opportunities to change together.
- Meet occasionally for the purpose of reviewing progress, discussing frustrations, and realigning. Maintain clarity on desired outcomes, individual expectations, and guiding principles.

Follow these principles and experience the benefits of diversity instead of its liabilities.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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