

THE DARDEN PERSPECTIVE

IN

First Person



Martin Davidson
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Embracing The Weird.



As the new Associate Dean and Chief Diversity Officer at Darden, I gave a short talk at the beginning of the year called “Embrace the Weird”, that focused on tactics students and managers can use to help them to engage with difference. Looking out into the audience, I could see many pockets of people who looked different from the majority of the crowd. A perfect visual example of what we often work with in organizational settings.

I wanted these new Darden students to notice and think about who in the crowd was different from them. And I was challenging them to be open to the idea of learning from those who were different. That didn’t mean giving up on finding the commonalities that connected them like growing up in the same city. But I also wanted them to be curious and inquire about what was unknown and uncommon, not simply be satisfied with learning about what was the same. To think about exploring the barriers that sometimes separate people and discover the possibilities that await them there.

And that is what I mean by “Embrace the Weird”. It is the people

on the margin, the ones who are a little different, who don’t seem to fit, and who frequently have the new idea or the unexpected input that helps us see what we are trying to do in a better way. As we know, this can be tremendously helpful when strategizing, problem solving, brainstorming and executing. Those who we wouldn’t normally engage are, often times, the real untapped resource. It’s great to have the comfort of working with people who are similar to you, but there are tremendous benefits in working with people who are different in important ways.

The last thing I asked the Darden class to remember about diversity is that every single one of us has a variety of characteristics and qualities that make us different, that come into play in who we are and what we do. Every single one of us is diverse. Don’t hesitate to engage someone whose difference makes you feel uncomfortable, or even extremely uncomfortable. That uncomfortable feeling is your best sign that you are facing an opportunity to see your work and your world in a new way.

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