

The Challenge of Managing Diversity in South Africa

A long-time observer and researcher shares his views on new opportunities the human resources community has to transform itself and shift to more inclusive personnel policies and approaches.

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Since April 1994, the dawn of democracy in South Africa brought challenges and opportunities in the public service. Remarkable opportunities were created for the previously disadvantaged as a result of the determination to eliminate racism, sexism, and religious oppression in the corridors of power. The enforcement of these “isms” contributed to the promotion of personnel practices that operated at the expense of most of the workforce—particularly for speakers of diverse African languages.

It is evident that the suppression was not only directed at language attributes; rather it was targeted at speakers of these languages as a whole. To redress this legacy in the context of the South African situation, human resources (HR) management must serve as a premise for effective diversity management in the workplace. Undoubtedly, leadership plays an important role in this process. It is acknowledged that the South African situation is unique and that it differs from one part of the country to another.

Preparing the Ground

In the public sector, managing people traditionally has been the task of personnelists. The retraining of the existing personnel administrators is crucial in redirecting them during the preparatory groundwork to accommodate a diversified work environment. The descriptive differences between the old-style personnel administration and a new HR management are illustrated in Figure 1.

Clearly, cultural and social factors have significant effects on personalities, and personality is a characteristic way in which a person thinks and acts in an effort to adapt to his or her environment, including cultural values, attitudes, self-image, and other responses to the workplace. A successful HR management approach must be more accommodating and more capable of promoting the diversity

within an organization to bring everyone onboard—to achieve buy-in and effective participation. This means that employees are regarded as an organized whole that brings meaningful contributions from their social, political, economic, and geographical experiences. In this regard, the commonness and uniqueness of the individual employees are aggregated to determine the organization’s level of richness.

Planting the Seed

The planting of seed implies organizational recognition of the worldviews to which employees subscribe. Worldviews demonstrate the assorted cultures, languages, religions, lifestyles, food, and music as preferences of the total sum of human cultures. They are the most valuable and the most worthwhile assets of humankind. The quality of human life is greatly enhanced by these variations and they contribute tremendous richness in the workplace. Despite their advantages in the workplace, these differences are sometimes the source of considerable hostility and disagreements. This is the challenge of an effective HR intervention, managing the hostilities to a level where these differences add value and are resourceful. Keeping in mind the South African example, Figure 2 compares world-views, among others, that are fundamental considerations for diversity management in the workplace.

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FIGURE 1: Shift from Old-Style Personnel Administration to the New Human Resources Management Approach

Personnel Administration	Human Resources Management
Employees are regarded as "employees."	Employees are regarded as "human beings" and "resources" for an organization.
Employees are expected to apply rules and prescripts.	As human beings, employees are expected to be resourceful in the development of management practices to accommodate diversity questions.
Employees are expected to comply with central rules.	Employees are provided with professional advice and guidance in the application of management practices.
Line managers have no responsibility for HR management.	Line managers are primarily responsible for the management and development of HR.

Adapted from *White Paper on New Employment Policy for Public Service*, 1997: 25.

Again, proper HR approaches and techniques can successfully manage these differences.

Cultivating Diversity

There are primary and secondary dimensions of diversity in the workplace. Primary dimensions are those that are inherent and unchangeable, while secondary dimensions are those that can be changed or made adaptable, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Implications for HR Policies

Both world-views and dimensions as discussed in this article impose wide implications for HR policies. The formulation of HR policies should enhance the wellness and well being of employees without compromising their diversities. Thus, policies should accommodate the differences and similarities that exist within the workforce in full consideration of the existing states that cultural diversity is not a matter of encouraging people from different cultural backgrounds to become assimilated into the prevailing corporate culture. Rather, it requires that the existing corporate culture should change in response to the different

Collectivism

In terms of this exposition, the African people would bring collectivism in the workplace. This demands a strong participative HR management environment. It is out of this collectivism that the concept of extended family develops. Collectivism promotes decentralization of decision making and taking. It endorses this as traditional requirements to promote cooperation in the workplace. A harmonious relationship between management and workers is built upon the pillars of collective agreement. Collectivism brings diverse opinions in the workplace and enhances continuous engagement in tapping different opinions that serve as indicators in pursuit of a healthy relationship with employees.

The African-centered worldviews consistently differ from the European-centered worldviews. European-centered worldviews subscribe to individualism. This individualism emanates from the value attached by Europeans to family as limited to a biological father, mother, and children, which is accepted as a modern practice that contracts from the traditional African view of the extended family. This translates in the workplace to the Eurocentric practice of decisions being centralized in the hands of a few people constituting the elite. In such a situation, group opinions are not respected. Instead, policy formulation flows downward from the elite at the top to the multitude of workers below. The elites share common values that are different from other workers. They place greater emphasis on control than on harmony.

cultures of those who are employed within the organization. For example, it is the tendency of personnel administration to consider family only in Eurocentric nuclear terms in administering medical schemes for employees. The different considerations of the extended family in the African centered world-view are not accorded full recognition even at the very minimal rate of inclusion.

Employees' uniqueness can promote conflicts in the workplace. An effective mechanism is needed to manage diversity-based conflicts with a view to consolidate various

FIGURE 2: African- and European-Centered World-Views

African-Centered	European-Centered
Collectivism	Individualism
Extended family	Nuclear family
Decentralization	Centralization
Traditionalism	Modernization
Harmony	Control
Cooperation	Competition

(Adapted from Papp, 1984: 459-467)

FIGURE 3: Primary and Secondary Dimensions of Diversity

Primary dimensions	Secondary dimensions
Age	Educational background
Ethnicity	Geographical situations
Gender	Income
Physical abilities	Marital status
Sexual orientation	Work experience

Source: Londen & Rosener, 1991:18-20

pieces into one "whole." However, it must be stipulated that conflict should not be perceived as something negative and destructive. Rather, it should be viewed as something natural, with a potential for making a positive contribution towards the performance of individual employees. Thus, it should be encouraged and simultaneously be removed through effective management process within the diverse work environment.

Reaping the Fruits

The fruits of effective diversity management within an organization are threefold: understanding, appreciation, and celebration.

Understanding

Understanding calls for the acknowledgment of the cultural diversity existing in the workplace without attaching negative judgment to it. This means that differences are acknowledged and understood to be enriching.

Appreciation

If employees understand their differences, they will appreciate each other more on a personal, interpersonal-institutional, and cultural level. Appreciation is facilitative in acknowledging that our way and their way differ, but neither is inherently superior to the other. This brings new forms of HR management that transcend the prevailing cultures through synergistic intervention. The synergy assumes that similarities and differences do exist and are of equal importance. The parochial idea of our way being better or superior to their way is best refuted, though accepting that there are many equally good mechanisms in working together.

Celebration

Understanding and appreciating differences and similarities that exist in the workplace usher the organization towards celebrating their uniqueness. The celebration may take place in the form of a food extravaganza or cultural festival, among other methods. It is argued that this celebration, or festivity, is part and parcel of the new HR management. ■

REFERENCES

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- There comes a time in any man's life, and I've had many of them. —Casey Stengel
- Nolan Ryan is pitching much better now that he has his curve ball straightened out. —Joe Garagiola
- He was thrown out trying to steal second; his heart was full of larceny but his feet were honest. —Arthur Baer
- The high point of my baseball career came in Philadelphia Connie Mack Stadium when I saw a fan fall out of the upper deck. When he got up and walked away the crowd booed. —Bob Uecker
- George Steinbrenner is the salt of the earth and Yankee players are open wounds. —Scott Osler

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- Don't think of yourself as indispensable. As Charles DeGaulle said, the cemeteries are full of indispensable men.

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