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A REVIEW PAPER ON MULTICULTURALISM IN WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

With the globalization of business, increased multiplicity in the workplace and multicultural inflection in society, cultural awareness has become one of the most important business gears in more or less every industry. Thoughtful of the cultures of those around you will improve communication, yield and harmony in the workplace. Formal cross-cultural knowledge training is very helpful for problem solving on multicultural business teams. And being in vicinity surrounded by people working in different multinational companies, we would like to discuss about the pros and cons of effect of multiculturalism in a workplace.

KEYWORDS

Multiculturalism, workplace environment.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace variety refers to differences between people in an association. That sounds simple, but diversity cover race, gender, ethnic group, age, personality, cognitive style, tenure, organizational function, education, background and more. Diversity not only involves how people distinguish themselves, but how they distinguish others. Those perceptions affect their communications. For a wide group of employees to function in effect as an organization, human resource professionals need to deal effectively with issues such as communication, flexibility and change. Diversity will increase considerably in the coming years. Successful organizations recognize the need for immediate exploit and are ready and willing to spend resources on managing diversity in the workplace now.

The workplaces will continue to reflect growing cultural variety and bring with it religious variety as well. Training workforce and especially supervisors to deal with lexis of this religious diversity in a constant and permissible fashion should improve the workplace as employees do not wish to leave their trust at home but will use it to bring their moral spirit to the job. Therefore, companies will benefit from both a policy of religious expression at work along with ample training for all workers, especially supervisors. There are several nuts and bolts this training should include. Much folklore exists concerning what is acceptable and these must be exposed. The goal should be to teach workforce how religious expressions can be rightly handled. The foundation for this is in our constitutional freedom of speech. Free speech during free time should be a given. However, during work time a variety of speech can disrupt the employer's hunt for efficiency. All must be treated equally including talk of sports, family, movies, religion, coming holidays, etc. The corporate goal can be reflected in a simple policy on speech in the workplace that includes religious speech. Since several issues may arise regarding accommodation requests for religious expression, the policy statement and training should deal with each of these. Common issues are situations arising from a worker's speech, personalizing workspace, personal time off requests for religious events, posting of religious materials, and personal appearance issues such as religious jewelry or attire. Supervisors should also be challenged to value fairness and objectivity even when they may have strong religious or non-religious convictions of their own. Finally in most companies, the training should include a discussion of any internal grievance process. Both workers and supervisors can be in error as to their religious rights in the workplace, so any appeal or internal appreciation process should be clearly outlined.

For governmental workers and supervisors some additional training will likely be essential. This training should focus on a neutral stance toward religion looks like. The myth of separation of church and state is so deeply entrenched into the thinking of many that a noteworthy portion of workers and supervisors intently believe religion has no place in government buildings. This flawed belief is increasingly being successfully challenged as courts are ruling that governmental employers are overstepping their authority to limit speech. Sorting out this myth which has become so tangled in the fabric of current governmental operations may pose the greatest training challenge of all.

Behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive and personality factors have been recognized as the main psychological factors that can impinge on intercultural effectiveness. Because intercultural effectiveness can be influenced by employee's socio biological background, employee's ethnicity, age, country of origin, educational/professional attainment and religion are noted as among the factors that can impinge on intercultural effectiveness as well. In addition to these factors, employees' intercultural effectiveness is argued to be influenced by prior experience and organizational factors such as structure, systems and policies.

Managing diversity in the workplace is a subject that has gained increased attention among managers during the last two decades. After all, the impact of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity programs on the nation's work force is undeniable. Women and minorities were the first to dramatically alter the face of the economic mainstream, persons with disabilities and foreign nationals followed not far behind.

Language barriers can be obvious but what about cultural differences? Intercultural skills are the skills that can help us communicate flexibly and sensitively with people from other cultures. People from other cultures may have different ways of communicating and different values. Use of eye contact, gestures and formal language and attitudes towards timekeeping, status and rules are just some examples where cultural differences may have an impact. In managing cross-culturally, we need to recognize that up to half of workplace behavior, including communication patterns and management styles, is culturally derived. A lack of cultural literacy can give rise to misunderstanding. Often when I'm brought in to "fix" foreign-born managers, the issue is twofold: a lack of cultural agility on their part and a lack of cultural awareness on the part of their organizations. The first step toward success is to understand our own cultural lens and then to learn other cultural worldviews.

REASON FOR SELECTION OF TOPIC

Organisations today operate within a de facto international economic system. The national societies and economies of today are no more isolated by geographical boundaries. A mention-worthy example would be the subprime crisis of USA in 2008 that shook the world. The effect of the catastrophic earthquake that devastated the small island nation of Haiti in January 2010 had wide-spread economic effects although the nation was small in size. And, today in 2012, we observe the maladies of yet another small country — Greece, grappling the world like never before.

This tendency of interconnection of the inhabitants of the world with respect to the cultural, economic, political, technological and environmental aspects of their lives is what we term today as **globalisation**. This trend has been brought about by three major factors viz. technology which has greatly eased international commerce, liberalization of trade laws (significant in India with regard to the recent past) and entrance of developing nations into the bigger arena by acceptance of foreign investments.

The manifestation of the same is seen in the ever increasing number of Multinational Corporations and Enterprises (MNCs & MNEs) today. This has resulted in shifting of people from their native countries to foreign countries where they have worked and lived. The number of such individuals, deemed **expatriates**, is on a steady rise, catalysed by the economic boom in various countries. Sudden exposure to an altogether new culture introduces utter confusion and disorientation into their minds. This is called **cultural shock**. This hugely influences their behaviour at workplace also in the initial phase. Time brings with it acclimatisation. But the condition may repeat again. It may also so happen that after few years, the individuals return to their homeland. Then the reverse process happens. They have to re-adjust with their native culture, known as **repatriation**. This again influences the individuals' organisational behaviour significantly. In a highly diversified country like India, it is all the more significant as India presents a plethora of intra-national culture. It has several cultures within itself. Hence, for an Indian employee, even in a state-owned corporation faces such issues which mould his behaviour accordingly. For example, linguistic barrier often may lead to barriers of interpersonal interaction. Absenteeism increases when a person from another region takes leaves during his festival at native place, over and above the holidays available at his place of work, which he otherwise would not have taken. This affects important parameters like motivation, performance, organisational commitment, etc. So in today's context, multiculturalism has become a crucial focus area with its manifold effects on the employees at workplace. Hence, evaluation of the same has been selected as the topic of discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The origin and definition of cultural diversity has been explained as follows. If the workforce profile in an organisation is composed of worker groups which show differences depending on demographic or other characteristics, diversity emerges. The criteria discriminating these groups include race, geographic origin, ethnicity, gender, age, functional or educational background, physical and cognitive capability, language, lifestyles, beliefs, cultural background, economic category, tenure with the organisation and sexual preference. (Dessler, 1998; Galagan, 1991:1/9; Bhadury et al., 2000)

Examples citing major cultural diversity also are not scarce. In USA, it is foreseen that the proportion of ethnic minorities will reach 50 per cent by 2050. It is cited that this country's workforce gradually becomes much more diversified particularly with respect to race, ethnic origin, age, gender, and physical and cognitive capability. (Boone and Kurtz, 1999; Wright and Noe, 1996; Fleury, 1999)

Cultural diversity in organisations goes into the inclusion of the secondary diversity size described earlier and has equally significant impacts on attitudes, manners and perceptions of the individuals. As distinctive qualities of group and individuals resulting from cultural diversity in organisations affect the workers' sense of identity and their way of their perceiving each other; also the differences in the management style, organisational attitude patterns, behavioural characteristics and communication styles can mostly be traced back to cultural effects. (Frey-Ridgway, 1997; Karoc-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 2001; Mwaura et al., 1998)

On the other hand, Shenkar (2001:1/25), in his article, deals with the concept of cultural distance, and he clarifies presumably measuring the extent to which cultures are similar or different. This construct has been applied to most business administration disciplines, i.e. management, marketing, finance and accounting. Cultural distance has been used as a key variable in strategy, management, organisational behaviour and human resource management. (Seymen, 2006)

Yateb (1997) defines national culture as a set of values, attitudes and behaviours includes everything related to work and organisation. To the author, these are brought into organisations as workers' cultural baggage, and culture as a social phenomenon directly affect the relations among people in organisations. Mellahi (2001) discloses in one of his research works about the post graduate candidates hailing from five different cultures and becoming managers, that the individuals understanding of the job, their expectations related to their demands as to how they should behave to others and how they should be treated in the working environment differs tied to the national culture. Hence the cultural background is seen to play a pivotal role throughout the employee hierarchy of an organisation.

VIEW DEPICTING POSITIVE EFFECTS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Authors like Cox and Blake argue that a culturally mixed workforce holds a potential competitive advantage for organisations. They opine that multiculturalism and a multicultural structure are the facts that are definitely to be backed up for the organisations of our day which target high performance (Dadfar and Gustavsson, 1992). Many surveys reveal that teams and a general workforce composed of individuals coming from different cultures can present more effective resolutions for the business problems. They show excellent performance in the long term and carry out their duties efficiently when compared to homogeneous employee groups. It can be said that this difference partially derives from the perspectives, views and experiences increasing creativity and novelty in multicultural teams. For instance, Iles and Hayers (1997) signify that many organisations believe they can increase their flexibility and responsiveness in globally competitive market environments through deployment of transnational project teams. They use such teams to address problems, integrate processes and learn new methods. It is claimed that these teams play a great role in realising novelties and changes and constituting strategic cooperation globally. (Seymen, 2006)

VIEW DEPICTING NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MULTICULTURALISM

A study of multi-site software development organizations yielded the following negativities of multiculturalism. Considerable differences in stakeholders' language and national culture affected global collaboration. Equally important in this study was the impact of differences in organizational and functional culture. Not only did remote sites develop their own organizational culture, but also the distance widened the gap between the different functional departments of the organization (marketing, business management, and development). Such a factor reduced the trust level, induced unnecessary delays and significantly impacted on achievement of a common understanding and negotiation of requirements. (Herbsleb and Moita, 2001; Damian and Zowghi, 2003)

VIEW DEPICTING BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Bhadury et al. (2000) suggests diversity can have both positive and negative impacts on organisations, but the nature of the impact depends, to a large extent, on the type of diversity climate that exists rather than the fact of diversity itself. Similarly, Dadfar and Gustavsson (1992) opine that there seems to be a general agreement that if cultural diversity is managed well, it can be an asset to performance, and if it is overlooked or mismanaged, it may diminish the performance. Particularly, in the case of being unsuccessful about constituting an effective cultural communication, individuals may feel themselves excluded and arouse the feelings of suspicion, lack of confidence and even hostility. Communication impediments can pervade every facet of life for expatriates and their families, producing unhappiness in their current surroundings and hindering adjustment to the host country and its culture. As a result, expatriates can become inefficient in the workplace, resulting in diminished career progress, psychological stress, and ultimately failure. (Seymen, 2006; Montagliani and Giacalone, 1998:1/9)

IMPACT ON ONE AS MANAGER

The various positive and effects described above are very important from the viewpoint of effective management of an organisation. A few other factors, as viewed through the lens of OB also come into play from the management perspective:

- (i) Concept of convergence hypothesis: This is a highly inflexible approach of organisational management which arises due to dearth of cultural diversity in organisations. Long-drawn absence of a good cultural mix leads one to adopt a biased orientation towards the single dominant culture present in the organisation. A manager may go on to believe that that particular way of managing the organisation given that particular cultural backdrop is the only effective way to manage the organisation, which is a grave **perception error**, detrimental to the organisation.
- (ii) Impact on performance appraisal and recruitment: Another effect which can be cited due to lack of effective cultural mix is **stereotyping**. A manager coming from a culturally skewed background may have his attitude towards those groups of people with whose members he had had a bad experience may incorrectly evaluate employees during performance appraisal or interviewees during recruitment. Here again a perception error is experienced owing to wrong attribution. Also people under the **stereotype threat** feel uncomfortable about running the risk of fulfilling the negative stereotype associated with his group. This curtails performance severely.

CHALLENGES

Taking full advantage of the benefits of diversity in the workplace is not without its challenges. Some of those challenges are:

Communication - Perceptual, cultural and language barriers need to be overcome for diversity programs to succeed. Ineffective communication of key objectives results in confusion, lack of teamwork, and low morale.

Resistance to change - There are always employees who will refuse to accept the fact that the social and cultural makeup of their workplace is changing. The "we've always done it this way" mentality silences new ideas and inhibits progress.

Implementation of diversity in the workplace policies - This can be the overriding challenge to all diversity advocates. Armed with the results of employee assessments and research data, they must build and implement a customized strategy to maximize the effects of diversity in the workplace for their particular organization.

Successful Management of Diversity in the Workplace - Diversity training alone is not sufficient for your organization's diversity management plan. A strategy must be created and implemented to create a culture of diversity that permeates every department and function of the organization.

Follow these dos and don'ts to remove the ambiguity from your team and excel at managing diversity.

- Respect your employee, even if you don't understand the way he or she may do things. Take the time to understand the "why" behind your employee's actions or thought process. You may find yourself evolving from passive curiosity to active acceptance and appreciation.
- Commit to working harder on maintaining communication. Understand culture-based causes of conflict, such as ideas about authority, decision-making or indirect work or communication styles. For instance, employees from certain cultures tend to respect the hierarchy within an organization and may not challenge your opinions. In that case you can solicit opinions from the group before expressing your own.
- Focus on the goal. Apply your expectations evenly but be open to new ideas about how to achieve your objectives. Be open to differing opinions.
- Take the time to learn about the culture of your employees. The internet is rich with information on the multicultural workforce, or just asks your staff. Taking the time to learn about differences is the first step to understanding how to best manage a multicultural staff.
- Ask for help. Solicit feedback on your employees' challenges and frustrations. Be open to understanding that if there is any negative feedback, it is likely being shared through the lens of someone who has had different cultural experiences than yours. It's not always an indictment on your management style or personal beliefs
- Understand that difference is okay. We are not one big melting pot. We are individuals with varying viewpoints, practices and beliefs which can only benefit the workplace.
- Don't shield yourself from people from different cultures. By operating outside of your comfort zone, you can build your confidence, establish trust and expand your worldview.
- Don't give in to stereotypes. Few of us truly epitomize the loud-mouthed American, the lazy Mexican, the studious Asian or the slow Southerner. Separate truth from fiction. Stereotypes are divisive and will lead to lowered employee morale and high employee turnover; not to mention increased employee relations issues.
- Don't condemn different viewpoints as always wrong. Regardless of your employees' cultural backgrounds, your staff bring years of experiences and education into your business colored by a cultural perspective that can lead to positive business outcomes. By listening to your team members, you can collaborate on creative solutions that none of you would have imagined individually.

Overall, start by being conscious of your own cultural bias before you try to understand - and judge others. Being self aware means perceptive how your values may differ from those of your organization. Look forward to scenarios in which perspectives may run over. By taking steps to reduce divergence and bridge communication gaps, you can build a solid team that propels your firm into the next phase of success.

CONCLUSION

Multiculturalism, like any other aspect of life has both its positive and negative effects. But given the current global backdrop of organisational, it is inevitable and it is not detrimental in the long run as well. So the final judgement comes out as adoption of multiculturalism in an organisation having overcome its various initial disadvantages. This will eliminate the various psychological and perceptual differences and the associated discomforts, thereby promoting performance as a stronger candidate for evaluation and effective organisational management.

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