

# Managing multicultural fet college



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Stellenbosch Managing a Multicultural FET College Abstract The Further

Education and Training (FET) Colleges have gone through a big merger

process where 152 colleges were reduced to only 50 colleges in 2001. This

change was brought by the promulgation of the new legislation that further

necessitated changes in both roles and functions of colleges. The merger

process called for the integration of people from diverse cultural

backgrounds.

This posed a big challenge towards the leadership and management of these

colleges. The top management of these colleges is now faced with the

complex and diverse leadership and change management issues. Originally,

some of these colleges had predominantly white staff members and others

had predominantly black staff members. The merger process then brought

these different cultures together to function under one roof. For the purpose

of this paper, our discussions will reflect the leadership and change

management challenges faced by the management of Umfolozi FET College

situated in the Northern-East of KZN.

Subsequently, the paper will discuss some theoretical aspects relating to the

issue of diversity within the college environment. Finally, the paper will then

make recommendations as to what leadership implications there are in order

to deal with diversity. 1. Introduction Managing a multicultural workforce

poses a complex challenges in both leadership and management style of the

organisation. The challenges are mainly attributable to the different views on

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how to deal with a culturally diverse workforce as well as our deep understanding of the meaning of such cultures.

Cascio (1995: 67) defines culture as “ the characteristics behaviour of people in a country or region”. Culture forces people to behave in a certain manner that distinguishes them from other people. Culture is also defined as “ the enduring norms, values, customs, and behavioural patterns common to a particular group of people” (Mayer, 2000: 72). When people move to other parts of the world, region or work environment, they tend to retain their cultures. It then becomes a challenge to bring these people from such diverse cultural backgrounds to work effectively together without any prejudice by one culture against other cultures.

Umfolozi FET College is not immune to these challenges, as it also comprises of people from a multicultural backgrounds. One then needs to begin by looking at what necessitated this multicultural organisation. Cascio (1995: 62) identifies “ five reasons why diversity has become a dominant activity in managing an organisation’s human resources: (i) the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy; (ii) globalization of markets; (iii) new business strategies that require more teamwork; (iv) mergers and alliances that require different corporate cultures to work together; and (v) the changing labour market”.

It is against this backdrop that the multiculturalism at Umfolozi College came into being as a result of the fourth reason. In 2001, twenty-four Technical Colleges in KZN merged into only nine Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges. This move came as a result of the new legislation that called for

the merger of the 152 Technical Colleges into 50 FET Colleges in the country. The merger process necessitated the birth of Umfolozi FET College that comprises of the Richtek Technical College, Eshowe and Esikhawini Teacher Training Colleges, Mandini Technical College, as well as eight skills training centres. The Richtek Technical Training College comprised of the predominantly white staff whilst the other sites had predominantly black staff members. This obviously posed a big leadership and management challenge to the college, as it had to try to work with this heterogeneous workforce. It also called for the understanding and redefining the newly merged organisational culture as well as embarking on the change process. A multicultural leader who is prepared to accept and implement change is the only one that can execute such transformation.

Dubrin (2007: 426) defines a multicultural leader as a “ leader with skills and attitudes to relate effectively to and motivate people across race, gender, age, social attitudes, and lifestyles”. The attitudes and skills defined by Dubrin (2007) help to promote and protect the various cultures, religions, and languages in the multicultural work environment. Unfortunately, fostering such mutual respect and harmony has its own challenges. The next section will then examine the challenges posed by this multicultural workforce environment.

However, for the purpose of this paper, we will focus only on the five challenges although we have many of them in the college work environment.

2. Challenges with a Multicultural FET College The integration of various campuses into one college has not been well received by some of the staff members who were not comfortable in mixing with people from other

cultures. The first challenge is that of a language barrier. Language became the first barrier to effective communication and subsequently leading to the formation of cliques within the college environment.

Although South Africa has eleven official languages, but certain campuses within the college resist accommodating other languages. At the Richtek Campus for an example, Afrikaans is the dominating language. Meetings, communication either verbal or written is done in Afrikaans. This phenomenon excludes all those who do not speak or understand the language. Those employees who are excluded do not participate in constructive discussions or meetings due to language barrier.

The exclusion of employees in accessing certain information may also result in poor performance by those who are excluded. On the other hand, all skills campuses use IsiZulu as their preferred language. They also resist using other languages during meetings or correspondences. In certain instances, this matter has led to some conflict situations due to the lack of tolerance for each other's language. The second challenge is the resistance to change whereby certain employees refuse to change and believe in doing things the way it has always been done in the past.

The FET Colleges had to change their programme offerings from the old Nated Programmes (N1 - N6) and replace them with the new National Certificate (Vocational). The majority of the college staff members were so used to teaching the old programmes and changing to new programmes became a challenge. This inhibits progress in teaching and learning, as a result the throughput rate of the college exams has dropped drastically. The

other form of resistance to change is based on gender where males feel as if they are the dominant force when it comes to decision making.

The college environment also experiences a lot of religion-based resistance where the majority of employees are Christians and thus tend to discriminate against those who belong to other forms of religion. The other form of resistance is based on ethnocentrism where certain groups perceive their culture to be superior to all other cultures in the college work environment. The third challenge is that of implementing the legislated decisions such as the employment equity act as well as the affirmative action policy.

The Employment Equity Act “ aims to achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunities and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups (Africans, coloureds, Asians, women and people with disabilities) to ensure that their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workplace” ( Grobler et al. , 2006: 85). There seem to be high level of resistance especially by the white males ho feel that these policies are like reversed discrimination against them. Their argument is that these policies purposefully exclude them from any potential employment opportunities. The fourth challenge is based on stereotypes and preconceptions where college employees identify a certain group within the college work environment and judging the group as collective and not treating individuals within the group on their own merits. Grobler et al. (2006: 77) defines stereotype as a “ fixed, distorted generalization about the members of a group”.

Assumptions are thus made about certain group of employees and they are labeled in a certain way and forgetting that individuals exist on their own. This has resulted in low morale and reduced motivation for staff. Some employees treat their colleagues as subordinates although they happen to be at the same level of authority. In some instances, managers do not want to promote employees who belong to a particular group that is perceived to be of high risk or lowering the standards. The last challenge identified at the college is that of unwritten rules that applies to certain employees within the same organisation.

This leads to double standards being applied to a certain sections and not throughout the college. One good example is that of the academic staff development and training which most of the time leave out the support staff. The college constantly train and develop its entire academic staff and tends to neglect those who are fulfilling the support roles in the college. Within the college again, we find that staff members who work at the four main campuses enjoy more privileges than those working in the skills campuses. The main campuses are perceived to be superior to the skills campuses.

This is a clear indication that the playing field is not always leveled when it comes to the application of rules. There seem to be no clear-cut rules as to how to handle the issues of staff development in the most fair and equitable manner. 3. Benefits of managed Multicultural FET College One of the benefits of managing workplace diversity is that it encourages employees to be more creative and innovative. Employees find new ways or methods of dealing with certain work related issues. They also learn creative and innovative ways of working with one another regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

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There is also big pool of creative minds being brought to work for a common cause. This can also create a range of skills that the college that were previously absent. The other benefit is that it enhances marketing and reduces cross-cultural difference in the behaviour of consumers. This is supported by Dubrin (2007: 421) that “ a key factor is that a multicultural group of decision makers may be at an advantage in reaching a multicultural market...one member of multicultural group may be able to focus a marketing strategy to demonstrate an appreciation of the targeted audience”.

This has been done at the various campuses where multicultural groups contributed in drafting the marketing strategy fro the college and it has already paid dividends. Employees are also encouraged to come to work and thus reducing both the absenteeism and turnover rates. According to Dubrin (2007: 421), “ more effective management of diversity may increase the job satisfaction of diverse groups, thus decreasing turnover and absenteeism and their associated costs”.

It is common knowledge that when employees are treated fairly without being discriminated on any bases, their place of work becomes their second home. They remain committed toward their employer and thus reducing the chances of looking for greener pastures. The college can also offer more flexible and market responsive programmes to its clients. This can be possible if employees are allowed to use their diverse backgrounds and talents in coming up with some fresh ideas to improve service delivery.



Improved service delivery may also help in attracting investments from both private and public sector to the college. This will in turn assist the college in reaching out to more communities and subsequently help in addressing the country's national imperatives. 4. Multicultural theoretical foundation A multicultural organisation is defined as an organisation “ that has achieved high levels of diversity, is able to fully capitalize on the advantages of diversity, and has few diversity-related problems” (Griffin, 1996: 432).

This statement is also supported by Jackson and Hardiman (1981) in Pope (1993: 203) in that “ a multicultural organisation reflects the contribution and interest of diverse cultural and social groups in its mission, operations, and product or service delivery; acts on commitment to eradicate social oppression in all forms within the organisation; includes the members of diverse cultural and social groups as full participants, especially in decisions that shape the organisation; and follows through on broader external social responsibilities, including support of efforts to eliminate all forms of social oppression and to educate others in multicultural perspective”. On the other hand, Pope (1993: 201) argues that “ at times the word ‘ multicultural’ is used synonymously with the word ‘ multiracial’ referring only to racial and /or ethnicity diversity.... other times it used more inclusively to cover such diverse groups as students of colour, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, international students, students with disabilities, and students with a variety of religious beliefs, dominations, or preferences”. One may then argue whether an organisation can be truly multicultural. The second argument will be what tool is used to measure multiculturalism in an organisation.

Griffin (1996: 433) provides us with answers to both questions raised in that “ few, if any, organisations have become truly multicultural... at the same time, more and more organisations are moving in this direction...when an organisation becomes multicultural, it reflects the six basic characteristics of such an organisation”. These characteristics can be used to gauge the state of readiness for the organisation whether it is a multicultural organisation. Griffin (1996: 435) argues that “ the major dimensions that characterize organisations as they eventually achieve this state are pluralism, full structural integration, full integration of the informal network, an absence of prejudice and discrimination, no gap in organisational identification based n cultural identity group, and low levels of intergroup conflict attributable to diversity”. Pluralism encourages each identifiable group in the organisation to work hard in learning about other groups within the same organisation. This helps in understanding other people’s culture and respecting such cultures. According to Griffin (1996: 433), full structural integration “ suggests that the diversity within an organisation is a complete and accurate reflection of the organisation’s external labour market”. The full integration of the informal network helps the organisation to eliminate “ barriers to entry and participation in an organisation” (Griffin, 1996: 433).

The other characteristic is that of absence of prejudice and discrimination that suggests that “ no traces of bias exist, and prejudice is eliminated” (Griffin, 1996: 433). It has already been argued by Griffin (1996) that only few organisations will reflect all six characteristics due to some barriers that might be caused by failure of senior leadership or management of those organisations to get involved as well as understanding the need of managing

diversity. 5. Dealing with a Multicultural FET College: Implications for Leaders and Managers Dealing with a diverse workforce may be challenging and daunting to many leaders and managers. However, there are various ways of ensuring that an organisation becomes truly multicultural.

Leaders and managers need to ensure that discrimination is eliminated at all cost in the work environment. They need to ensure that fair treatment is always applied in dealing with issues affecting their employees. The application of legislation needs to be done without any double standards. Human (2001: 5) argues that “ when we begin to understand what diversity management is really about, we begin to see that effective diversity management underpins what most business people would argue makes sound business sense: judging and managing individuals on the basis of clearly specified job-related and performance-related criteria, in a business culture which incorporates as much opportunity for individuals to express important aspects of themselves as reasonably possible; for example, linguistic, religious, dietary and domestic variations”. We therefore need to give recognition to opportunities presented by having a diverse workforce. Whilst it might be challenging, but there seem to be more positives associated with a managed diverse workforce. On the other hand, Dubrin (2007: 436) suggests six ways of achieving a multicultural work environment: “(i) hold managers accountable for achieving diversity; (ii) establish minority recruitment, retention, and mentoring programs; (iii) conduct diversity training; (iv) conduct intercultural training; (v) encourage the development of employee networks; and (vi) avoid group characteristics when hiring for person-organisation fit”.

This is supported by Cascio (1995: 83) that “ to maximize the potential of all members of the workforce, link concerns for diversity to every business strategy: recruitment, selection, placement, succession planning, performance appraisal, and rewards”. Leaders need to adopt the concept of transformational leadership through presenting a compelling case for change where they demonstrate verbally and in writing that they are committed to change. As transformational leaders, they also need to accept and create strategies of dealing with resistance to change by facilitating ownership in the change process. They also need to empower themselves as well as others by creating an enabling environment for all employees without discrimination or favouritism.

Griffin (1996: 435) suggests that “ managing diversity in an organisation can be done by both individuals and the organisation itself...individual approaches include empathy, tolerance, and willingness to communicate... organisational approaches are through policies, practices, diversity training, and culture”. 6. Conclusion After having examined the concept of creating a multicultural college, one can therefore conclude that it poses many challenges for both leaders and managers. However, despite those challenges, leaders and managers can actually convert those challenges into opportunities for their organisations. There needs to be an understanding as to why it is so important for an organisation to do diversity training with all its employees including management. Leaders and managers also need to develop an understanding of what is stereotyping and its impact thereof in the workplace.

There are also various methods in implementing diversity in the workplace in order to create a environment conducive for all employees. Leaders need to create an atmosphere where all employees recognise that individuals are different and shall be treated as such. Diversity needs to be managed effectively in order to yield good results, if not it might become detrimental to the success of any organisation. Diversity underpins leaders and managers dealings with their employees, clients and the public at large. Through effective diversity management, the organisation can attract the most skillful employees that can assist in improving service delivery.

With improved service delivery, more clients can be attracted and reached. Each employee needs to be given an opportunity to demonstrate his or her individual talent. This will enhance creativity and innovation and subsequently help the organisation in gaining competitive advantage an effective service. Leaders and management need to ensure that all employees are treated fairly and equitably in as far as recruitment, training, and promotions are concerned. This shall be done regardless of race, gender, religion, culture, or disability. REFERENCES Cascio, W. F. 1995. Managing Human Resources. 4th Ed. McGraw-Hill, Inc. , USA. Dubrin, A. J. 2007.

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