Diversity in the workplace essay sample

Diversity is an area of management, which is not easy or proven yet to be successful. The realities of organisational life are such, that issues surrounding bottom line considerations, market forces, control, leadership, structure, processes and culture all conspire to make the management of diversity very difficult indeed. In striving to create diversity -oriented organisations, managers are facing a huge challenge. They are not only attempting to change norms and values which have existed since organisations were first formed – they are also trying to change the attitudes of individual members of their workforce. These individuals come from a society, which is still plagued by the " isms" of age, sex, race and other prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes. In this essay, therefore, I will explore what diversity means according to the latest research and describe how the various realities of organisational life can mitigate against the effective management of diversity. Having done this, the difficulty of the task will be apparent, but that should not lead us to conclude that it is naï¿½ve to attempt to mange diversity. There are definite benefits to attempting to create a diversity-oriented organisation and it may be that, idealistic as it may seem, we really have no choice in the matter.

The meaning of diversity

Managing diversity means different things to different people. It can mean integrating different parts of an organisation to enable them to work together (e. g. Goold and Campbell 1987). It can relate to the issue of national cultures within multinational organisations (e. g. Hofstede 1984). It can also refer to the development of equal opportunities. It is on this third

area that this essay will concentrate – the evolution and transformation of equal opportunities into managing diversity.

The definition within this context that I prefer, is the one offered by Kandola and Fullerton (1998). " The basic concept of managing diversity accepts that the workforce consists of a diverse population of people. The diversity consists of visible and non-visible differences, which will include factors such as sex, age, background, race, disability, personality and work-style. It is founded on the premise that harnessing these differences will create a productive environment in which everyone feels valued and where their talents are being fully utilised and within which organisational goals are met".

Trends in population diversity

One of the most compelling reasons given by many people that organisations have to manage diversity is the population change which is taking place, particularly in the USA and Western Europe. The most significant changes are as follows.

Although ethnic minorities form only a small proportion of the overall population, 5. 5 percent, i. e. 3 million out of a total population of 54. 9 million, they are, on average, younger than the white population, comprising 9. 2 per cent of those between 0-4 years; 9 percent between 5-21 years and 6. 1 percent of those between 16-24 years. (The Centre of Research in Ethnic Relations 1993)

By the year 2000, the number of 16-25 year olds entering the labour market will have fallen by 1. 5 million compared with 1987 (Employment Department). This essentially means that one traditional source of new recruits for organisations i. e. school leavers, is drying up. At the other end of the scale the number of older people in the UK is increasing as people live longer and are active into their late 70s.

Women are making a significant and visible impact on the UK economy. Between 1993 and 1997, women made up 44 percent of the labour force. By 2001 they are expected to make up 45. 3 per cent. In the USA, white males will be in a minority of new entrants to the labour force in 2000 (Johnston and Packer 1987)

These sometimes startling facts show that the workforce is in the process of rapid change and that further changes can be expected in the future. There will be more ethnic minorities, women, older people and people with caring responsibilities than ever before, as we move into the 21st century. Managing diversity within this changing context must be deemed to be a realistic business objective.

What is a diversity-oriented organisation?

The determination to be diversity-oriented must pervade an entire organisation if it is to be effective. It must be an organisational strategy, developed via a long-term programme. According to Cox (1991), organisations can be classified into one of three types – monolithic, plural and multicultural. In the monolithic organisation, one majority group predominates, traditionally the white male group. There will be a small

representation of women and ethnic minorities, but they will be found mainly in the lower levels of the organisation. Minority groups entering the organisation will be expected to adapt to the existing culture, one which places little importance on the integration of minority groups and which tolerates discrimination and prejudice.

However, Cox believes that the monolithic organisation is now a rarity and has been surpassed by the evolution of the plural organisation. The plural organisation is more inclusive of the minorities, although their representatives are still predominantly in non-managerial roles. The driving force behind the integration, is a strategy of affirmative action, an approach that ultimately leads to great inter-group conflict. While discrimination and prejudice are reduced in the plural organisation, minority groups are still expected to assimilate into the majority culture. The majority of organisations in the 1990s are thought to fall into this category.

The multicultural organisation is Cox's vision of the diversity-oriented organisation. In his view, it is one where people from non-traditional backgrounds can make a contribution and achieve their ideal potential. It is an organisation where all cultural groups respect, value and learn from one another. There will be full integration of all cultural groups into the structure and into the informal networks of the organisation. There will be an absence of prejudice and discrimination and an equal identification of minority and majority group members with the goals of the organisation and opportunities for the alignment of organisational and personal career goal achievement. There will be a minimum of inter -group conflict based on race, gender, nationality and other identity groups of organisation members.

Cox's vision is praiseworthy, but is it attainable? If we examine some of the characteristics of a diversity-oriented organisation as described by its advocates, we can attempt to answer this question.

The characteristics of a diversity-oriented organisation

We know to what extent a n organisation is diversity-oriented, by seeing how it measures up to what are described as basic required characteristics by researchers in the field. For example, Kandola and Fullerton (1998) state that such an organisation must demonstrate a clear mission and values; objective and fair processes, a skilled workforce which is aware and fair; active flexibility; individual focus and a culture that empowers.

Mission and values

The diversity-oriented organisation will have a strong, positive mission and core values, which make managing diversity a necessary, long-term business objective of the organisation and a responsibility of all employees. The values must reflect the personal and work needs of all employees. (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998)

Without a strong focus and adherence to core values, the " balkanisation" of the organisation could occur (Gordon 1992), that is, the fragmentation of individuals into cliques and separate in-group/out-groups with tension and conflict between them. Even without the added dimension of diversity, the tendency for groups of individuals to separate and form subcultures is present in organisations. Handy (1984) observed as much and he also stressed that one of the main tasks of management was to manage these

sub-groups/cultures. The task is deemed to be difficult enough, even without the added complexity that the multicultural organisation, as defined by Cox, would present.

Objective and fair processes

All the processes and systems of an organisation for example recruitment, selection, performance appraisal and promotion will have been audited and re-audited to ensure that no one age, group, sex, ethnicity or type predominates at any one level (Kandola and Fullerton1998)

Recruitment and Selection

The processes of recruitment and selection are extremely difficult to get right. Certain parts of the process are easier to control than others. You can, for example, ensure the appropriate wording and placing of job advertisements. You can issue clear, unambiguous instructions for making applications and you can ensure that any tests that are used are not culturally biased. However, the interview is notoriously difficult to control. As Dipboye (1994) points out, carefully structured interviews, where one is not allowed to deviate from the set questions, are difficult to implement and often unsatisfactory for both interviewer and interviewee. On the other hand, the continued use of the unstructured interview in selection processes leaves the candidate vulnerable to the personal prejudices of individuals and the unspoken rites and symbolism of the organisation. These can be so easily used to block an individual who does not belong to the predominant group and to allow easy entry to the initiated, who understand the rules and

conventions of the interview exchange simply by reason of their birth and shared group identity.

Promotion

Practitioners advocate total transparency here. This, they believe, would take power away from any informal networks that may operate, networks that perpetuate the " its not what you know, it's who you know" style of selection and promotion.

In reality, power does reside with management and decisions about who is suitable for management positions have often already been made in an informal way by the time the job is advertised. There is also often a tendency to want to look outside the organisation for a new management recruit. The success of recruitment agencies and firms of head hunters lies in this very fact.

Performance Appraisal

Performance appraisal, is a controversial topic. According to Randell (1989) it leads to three contentious issues – what and how are the observations made; why and how are these observations discussed and what determines the level of performance in a job? When these issues are misunderstood and implications mis-applied, appraisal can be see as " dysfunctional" in that it can detract from performance and satisfaction. Also, he draws the conclusion, based on studies in the USA and Britain, that interpersonal skills play a major part in the effectiveness of an appraisal interview. This would lead one to feel that unless the manager is sensitised to all the issues

surrounding diversity and is highly skilled communicatively, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible to conduct a " fair" appraisal.

Skilled workforce aware and fair

Everyone in the workforce is dedicated to managing diversity. They understand why diversity is important and what they have to do to make it a reality. All employees have been trained to recognise how their biases and prejudices can influence their decisions and actions and knowledgeable about the ways to prevent this happening. Employees recognise the value of teamwork and are skilled at working in teams.. (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998)

This is a very tall order indeed. An ever-present issue and one of the biggest obstacles to managing diversity is stereotyping. Managing a diverse workforce can often be a difficult task not necessarily because of the real differences that exist between people but because of those that we believe exist. To remove this tendency in a workplace is a huge challenge and just as the home environment influences children's behaviour in school, so the influence of society at large, with its values and norms, is brought into the workplace.

Active flexibility

Active flexibility in the diversity-oriented organisation is not only in terms of working patterns but also in all polices, practices and procedures. The notion of flexibility should be broadened to include the needs of all employees not just those with families (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998)

While the benefits of flexibility have been firmly established, Hall and Parker (1993) believe that more can be achieved for both employers and employees by adopting a more strategic approach to organisational flexibility. In their opinion, organisations should move towards being employee-friendly rather than just family-friendly. They ague that relating flexibility to just to work/family issues not only alienates those who do not have families, but may also communicate to employees that the only legitimate outside interest they can have is a family. However, recent research in the UK reveals that organisations do not view flexibility in a strategic fashion. Rather, it appears to be an ad hoc response to external pressures.

Individual focus

A traditional response to negative stereotyping has been to hold one or two-day awareness training sessions that serve to point out the differences between groups. This has had the effect, in many cases, of not only ingraining stereotypes even further, but also of creating new, more powerful, stereotypes that simply replace the old ones (Ellis and Sonnenfield, 1994). A number of organisations have already recognised this possibility and have also realised that individual differences rather than group differences should be the focus of attention. Ellis and Sonnenfield recommend that cross-cultural training programmes should be oriented towards this approach and organisations like Xerox, Pepsi-Cola International and Coopers & Lybrand have adopted this policy.

Culture that empowers

Thomas (1994) describes the diversity -oriented organisation as one that eliminates the subtle and not-so-subtle road blocks to participation and creativity that can exist if a diverse workforce is hampered by a culture bound to the ethics, practices and customs of the mono-cultural (usually white and male) hierarchy that was present at its inception.

Kandola and Fullerton (1998) have a vision of an empowering culture where participation and consultation is devolved to the lowest point possible and where there is open communication and open flow of information throughout the organisation within and between levels.

Both these definitions seem to ignore the realities of organisational life. One such reality is that control of information and knowledge equals power (Morgan 1986). Even if the avowed intention to be " open" is there, the " natural" forces of organisational life will fight against its realisation. Another, is that underlying attitudes and assumptions play a crucial part in defining the culture of an organisation. These are difficult to define and capture and yet must be the " right" ones for the proper development of a truly multicultural organisation as defined by Cox. Schein (1990) talks about " espoused" and " real" values and the contrast there is often between these. The challenge here then, is to delve below the espoused values, which may be supportive of diversity, to the real values, which exist in an organisation and see whether dissonance exists.

Benefits real and perceived

Specifically, the proven benefits include recruiting from a wider range of talented candidates, retaining this talent and associated savings from lower

turnover and absenteeism. Attracting talent from the broadest range of people available will have an impact on organisations, not only in terms of the quality of their workforce, but also in terms of cost effectiveness, particularly with regard to training time required (Kandola 1989)

The importance of organisational flexibility has been recognised for some time and there is solid evidence of the benefits to be gained, especially in terms of reduced turnover and absenteeism. The majority of cases cited to support this contention refer to the improved retention rates of women that have been achieved by offering flexibility in work hours and practices (Cox and Blake, 1991).

Debatable benefits include increased quality – by managing diversity an organisation not only employs the best, but also achieves the best from full utilisation of its workforce, which increases the chances of achieving its quality objectives. While the argument has much to commend it, in terms of its logic and rationale, there is unfortunately little or no data to support it (Kandola and Fullerton)

Managing diversity is thought by some to enable an organisation to get closer to its customers and thus improve its customer service. The argument goes that the changes in the customer base warrant a similar makeup within the workforce. While the evidence is slight, it does suggest that the diversity-oriented organisation should be more responsive to the diverse needs of its customer base. However no conclusive data is yet available

With regard to team working, the research on the success of heterogeneous teams is ambiguous. Bettenhausen (19 91) concluded that diversity "

hinders group and organisational performance especially in times of crisis or rapid change." Kandola and Fullerton would argue that these difficulties are not insurmountable, but they need to be recognised and strategies devised to overcome them. As Bettenhausen himself says, " because increased pluralism is an unavoidable fact of organisational life, it is not very helpful to merely acknowledge that process losses may outweigh the benefits of heterogeneity."

Indirect benefits are thought to accrue as a natural consequence of realising the clear and debatable benefits mentioned above, that is, such things as better public image, satisfying work environment, improved relations amongst staff, increase in job satisfaction and morale, increased productivity and competitive edge.

However, many of these indirect benefits could easily be those expected of an organisational change initiative and, as such, cannot be directly attributed to a diversity-oriented change programme.

In conclusion, therefore, I would maintain that, whilst diversity as a notion is a difficult concept to incorporate fully into an organisation's development, the difficulties should not be a deterrent to action. After all, organisations must deal with what is increasingly the reality of their own diverse workforces and the diverse marketplaces in which they operate. It is not naï¿½ve to strive to achieve some of the characteristics, which have been described here, since they make good sense, not least of all in terms of recruitment and retention of staff. There are also other benefits, which would seem to be realisable ones, of improving customer service and quality.

However, to make claims of benefits for which there is no clear evidence, is naï¿½ve. Managing diversity is not a panacea. Unrealistic expectations at the start of the process will merely fuel discontent, disillusion and dissatisfaction later.

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