Bright Ideas

Are you really ready to embrace diversity?

Diversity in the workplace is a lot more than more interesting potluck lunches. It's about the different values and perspectives that people with different cultural values and experiences bring to the workplace. While that can add strength to decisions, it also can lead to conflict and challenges for an organization's leadership. Having a plan can help.

What values make a difference?

The big name in cultural diversity in the workplace is Geert Hofstede. He identified 4 important dimensions of national culture that affect workplace interactions. They are power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Other dimensions have been added (e.g., long-term orientation, pragmatic vs. normative, indulgence vs. restraint) with research identifying where many national cultures are positioned, but we will start with these four and look at their impact on workplaces.

Power distance. Some cultures promote an egalitarian view that all people have or should have equal power. Others accept that some people or roles have more power over decisions affecting others

Our employee engagement practices reflect a low power distance culture.

as well as themselves. While few workplaces operate as a collective in North America, the people in them do expect to have a say in how they do their work. They expect to be able to share problems they see and ideas for improvements with management and be listened to seriously. In fact, current thinking in management views this type of employee engagement practice as the ideal for ensuring a committed and productive workforce.

People from high power distance cultures expect to be told what to do by those in authority. They view people who question current practices or suggest better ways to do things as aggressive and as causing those in power to lose face. Loss of face and loss of personal dignity, respect and power are linked in such cultures. While no one in any culture wishes to be embarrassed, different cultures have different ways to avoid embarrassing the boss. In workplaces where ideas for improvement or mission fulfilment are expected from everyone, ways to contribute without threatening those in power may have to be an overt part of employee engagement strategies.

Individualism vs. Collectivism. In PR communications, we are taught to write with our audience' interests in mind and answer their question of "what's in it for me?" This is the very essence of individualism in which people look out for their own interests and those of their loved ones. In management, we try to align workers' interests with those of the organization so that they see that what is good for the organization is also good for them. This is one reason we aim for a "good fit" in hiring. Loyalty to the organization must be earned and is easily lost.

People from collectivist cultures are more likely to buy in to the organization's vision and work to

fulfill it with less management effort. In return for their own loyalty, they assume that the organization will look after them. Loyalty is expected and bi-lateral.

North American business practices that include restructuring and downsizing have reinforced an individualistic attitude and higher turnover than seen in past generations. Those from collectivist cultures are more likely to give management the benefit of the doubt in decisions affecting their job.

Masculinity vs. Femininity. Workplace cultures that value competitiveness and assertiveness are considered masculine, while those that value consensus-building, cooperation and looking out for the weak are feminine. Within the North American culture, for-profit businesses often operate on a more masculine model, while not-for-profits and charities may have a more feminine style and have more females in their workforce. Taking time to meet a client's needs takes priority over punctuality for

the next appointment in feminine cultures. Males from more feminine and collectivist cultures are often a good fit in such workplaces.

Dealing with uncertainty. Just as some people are more comfortable with ambiguity than others, cultures differ in their responses to the unknown. Cultures with a low tolerance of uncertainty often develop a greater number of rules to live by and follow them more rigidly. Making mistakes as a way of learning is frowned on, as it likely means that they violated a rule. They are thrown off when supervisors tell them to use their own judgement.

Research on the development of expertise takes a largely North American perspective. While we start by learning the rules, we learn to deal with new or ambiguous situations by determining whether a particular rule fits better than others. We eventually learn to adjust our rule-based behaviour to develop creative and effective responses to new situations with a minimum

of anxiety. A non-western perspective would look at the development of expertise as tied to the number of rules one has learned.

Implications for management

Before we can build a stronger and more inclusive workplace, we need to examine our workplace culture and assumptions about what is right and proper. Hofstede notes that "culture only exists by comparison." We are only aware of our own values (both personal and workplace) when we are confronted by a different way of thinking. Instead of reacting by trying to change others (or firing them), consider other perspectives and what strengths they can bring to the organization's endeavours if properly managed. The truth is that some cultural variations are a better fit than others for some enterprises. Having a knowledge-based plan can save your organization time and money as it addresses workforce diversity.

Check It Out.
The Hofstede Centre. http://geert-hofstede.com/

From Where I Sit

Culture can be more than ethnicity

Most of my readers know that I have spent the past few decades working closely with the developmental disability sector. While no one questions whether ethnic groups have a definable culture, the same is not true for disability. Is there truly a disability culture?

Yes and no. In fact, there are many disability cultures. Deaf culture is one of the best defined, with its own humour and artistic

expression. The use of a sign language shapes definitions of politeness and personal space. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

In order to develop a culture, members of a disability community must be able to gather and discover their common experiences and beliefs. They must be given the opportunity to find a collective voice. While integrating with the mainstream culture has benefits, just as for those of other cultures, maintaining a connection with others who have disabilities is essential to a strong, valued disability culture.

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