



DIVERSITY AT WORK: A FACTOR PROMOTING THE CREATION OF AN INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

A highly performing organization indicates the presence of talented employees from diverse backgrounds who are trained on workplace diversity and motivated towards building the brand image of the organization. The inclusive workplace environment supports the employees to be free of any fear of disclosing their personal identity pertaining to their sexual orientation, caste, creed, ethnicity, etc. Managers need to manage this diversified culture in all layers of the organization. The challenges arising out of this have to be managed with proper care and attention, through proper training to the employees. In the context of globalization, this workforce diversity would help the organizations to attract and retain the most talented employees by creating an inclusive and supportive work environment.

Keywords: Workforce Diversity, Work Culture, Inclusive and Supportive work environment

INTRODUCTION

Every organization is culturally diverse. As suggested by Carrell and Mann (1993) and Solomon (1990), though there are innumerable ways in which diversity can be defined, there is no definition that fully includes all the characteristics that a diverse population may bring to the workplace. It also showed that there are many forces that are driving diversity issues in organizations. For example, there is a significant increase in women and minority populations in the workplace; Americans continue to mature; an increasing number of minority youths are becoming part of the workforce; gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals are becoming an important part of the workforce and marketplace; people with disabilities are also increasingly entering the labor force; and more business is becoming global.

Elmuti (1993) and Flagg (2002) explained that the extent to which an organization adapts and implements this cultural diversity can be referred to as “workplace diversity.” The existing group of people belonging to a particular organization experiences a unique group identity under different categories, and this includes gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and age. This is all an inclusive part of cultural diversity. The extent to which an organization adheres to cultural diversity determines its organizational culture.



As defined by Anon (2013), “Workplace diversity means creating an inclusive environment that accepts each individual's differences, embraces their strengths and provides opportunities for all staff to achieve their full potential”.

Evolution of workforce diversity

The evolution of the concept of workplace diversity can be traced back to 1960s. It first came into existence in the US companies where the implementation process was done through the enactment of Equal Pay Act 1963. This law demanded the organizations to pay equal remuneration for men and women performing the same job. This originated from the concept of Equal Employment Opportunities during 1940s. It is in 1953 that Watson Jr. of IBM issued the first equal opportunity policy letter. Later, in 1964, the enactment of The Civil Rights Act led to the prohibition of discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The hiring and firing decisions are now to be made based on these Acts. (Jackson and Ruderman, 1995, Robinson, 2002)

As suggested by Hickman and Creighton-Zollar (1998), in the light of globalization, organizations struggled to set up a market for them and sustain amidst the continuously increasing competition. The business is spread all over the world. This concept necessitated the organizations to focus on diverse cultures across various borders of the world to facilitate the production of various goods and services that are customized to fulfill the unique needs of different markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As suggested by Cox and Blake (1991), there are three types of organizations working towards the development of cultural diversity and they are named as follows- the monolithic organization, the plural organization, and the multicultural organization. The organizations' where the amount of structural integration (i.e. the existence of employees belonging to different cultural groups in a single organization) is to a very small extent, is called as monolithic organization. The second type is the plural organization which has heterogeneous membership in it to a greater extent when compared to the monolithic organization. Enough care is taken to be more inclusive of employees from different cultural backgrounds, irrespective of the influence of existing dominant groups. The multicultural organization is the one which not only contains many different cultural groups, but it values this diversity to the major extent.

Cultural Diversity for better Work culture

Every organization has different categories of employees. While a few of them work willfully, few have to be monitored to accomplish their tasks and some need to be pushed hard towards their work. Despite of having innumerable reasons behind this, one of the major reasons can be the feeling of employees towards their relationship with workplace. (Ely and Thomas, 2001, Konrad, 2003) The feeling of employees that they cannot be themselves at work, make them not to engage fully as part of the team or in assigned work. For example, an employee may feel that sexual



orientation or a hidden disability cannot be revealed due to fear of reprisals. Presence of such 'closed' environment can influence the involvement of an individual in the organization, finally bringing out some major issues like increased absenteeism, decreased productivity due to low morale of the employees and retention difficulties. (Makower, 1995).

It is suggested by Jackson et al. (2003) that in this scenario, it is the "Leaders" of the organization who play an important role in directing the shift towards increased diversity and inclusiveness in an organization. Dealing with the issues related to inclusion and discrimination needs an open, effective communication, as well as clear channels for feedback. There is a chance of improvement in every organization which might have a different start from a different place and in a different context.

The fear of people in the process of implementing or addressing the issues of this diversity can be neutralized through an informative /instructive approach. There might be a fear in the middle and the lower management level that a wrong thing might be enunciated or employees might perceive them to be discriminatory or they might be suppressed due to the rigidity of political correctness within the organization. (Northcraft et. al., 1995).

But the factor that needs to be understood here is that though there are enough standards set for the appropriateness of an employee's behavior, the concept of diversity is not about perfection at workplace. The organizations where this diversity and inclusion are best nurtured help the people of an organization to learn from their mistakes rather than to embarrass or degrade an individual's self-respect.

According to Patricia (2017), in the present day scenario, cultural diversity has reached its highest point than it has ever been. The increased ratio of diversity in various organizations has made it more important to understand and manage that diversity. A diverse workforce is a combination of people of different backgrounds, races, ages, sex, and/or religions. A better performance in all areas of the organization needs a diverse workforce. New management strategies, efficient organizational leaders and managers who can handle the situational differences amongst the diversified employees are needed to be put in place for this diverse workforce. As suggested by Dr. Sondra Thiederman, who is a leading expert in workplace diversity, "whether you are a business owner, executive, salesperson or customer- service professional, your success will increasingly depend on your ability to function in a culturally diverse marketplace" (Thiederman, 2000).

The workplace diversity is a factor whose growth ratio is on continual rise. The statistical evidences of U.S Census Bureau (2001) disclose that one in four people in U.S. belong to a minority or are foreign-born. As suggested by Jackson et.al. (1998), in the current organizations, women are expected to fill 65 percent of the jobs created during the years to come ahead.



This indicates that the demographic composition is affecting not only the makeup of the labor workforce but also the makeup of the marketplace. Hence, adopting a diverse workforce and its proper management is considered to be one of the competitive strategies that help the organizations in attracting diverse customers and employees with different organizational perspectives that could be of help towards the development of creativity within the organization.

To cite a few examples of the implementation of workforce diversity and inclusion, the staffing policy of Cornell Cooperative Extension can be reviewed. The authors Soneeta and Barbara (1998) explained about it as follows.

“The staffing process utilized in CCE includes three stages: (a) position development, (b) recruitment, and (c) selection and support. Each stage offers opportunities to change organizational culture. During position development, staff and volunteers review the position vacancy considering current and future program priorities, identify essential job functions, and examine alternative staffing options. The second stage--recruitment-- includes developing and implementing an inclusive recruitment strategy. Faculty, staff, and volunteers develop a recruitment plan that includes targeted mailing lists, personal contacts, electronic postings, national publications, professional conferences, and a call for nominations. Cornell Cooperative Extension emphasizes recruiting individuals who bring a diverse perspective and are supportive of diversity. The final stage-- selection and support--involves reviewing applications for the position, conducting interviews, making the offer, and designing an individualized orientation and development plan for the new employee.”

This policy helped the organization in improving its strategy of employing diversified employees that led to an inclusive work environment. Adjusting to diversity involves developing a new corporate culture that will work naturally for all. The early 1970's can be referred to observe changes in the labour demographics in the composition of the U.S. workforce. Thomas (1990) and Wilson (1995) a higher percent of increase in the workforce diversity for white women and minorities than for white men with a continuation of current trends. This was further explained by Adler in 2003 that the extent to which managers recognize diversity and its potential advantages and disadvantages defines an organization's approach to managing the diversity. According to him, in this world of globalization, no organization would survive without workforce diversity. The management should take up the responsibility of critically evaluating the benefits of workforce diversity in their organization. In the same line, the management should put in place the conditions which would enhance workforce diversity in their organizations, more especially in their strategies formulation on the diversity of the workforce. As suggested by Ivancevich and Gilbert (2000), with the diversity of the workforce, the organization would become competitive internally and externally.

Every organization which has diverse workforce always has a combination of miscommunication and lack of understanding as challenges existing in it. A well-defined policy of diversity and application of appropriate team-building exercises can



help employees learn to communicate and respect each other. Ewert et.al. (1995) suggested that the implementation of diversity training should happen from the top through the bottom of the company hierarchy. The company's diversity has to be assessed across all departments. As the Judicial Authorities are against to racial discrimination, employers should be careful to avoid "reverse discrimination" during the staffing process.

An additional factor which challenges culturally diverse work environments is "Cultural bias" that includes both prejudice and discrimination. (Colvin and Riccucci, 2002) Another challenge faced by culturally diverse organizational environments is "Assimilation". Assimilation into the dominant organizational culture is a strategy that has had serious negative consequences for individuals in organizations and the organizations themselves. As suggested by USDA (1991), during the process of an individual's assimilation (i.e. adjusting oneself to the alien environment), very less energy is left behind with the individual to accomplish the given tasks and it leads to a reduction in the organizational productivity.

Necessity for workplace diversity

As suggested by Loysk (1996) and Roosevelt (2001), when an organization comes across situations like labor shortage, it cannot let itself exclude a substantial part of the labor force. The workforce diversity has different advantages pertaining to business economics. It attracts a wider group of customers that result in an increased organizational turnover. It leads to the development of innovative products and services, which are necessary to compete with others in the context of globalization. The brand image of the employer is improved.

Managers have a chance of improving this inclusive and supportive work environment through workforce diversity. The managers need to value diversity by accepting the principle of multiculturalism. There should be a positive approach towards attracting a diverse applicant pool at the time of recruitment. This can be done by avoiding the referrals from current employees, since this tends to produce candidates similar to the present workforce. (Kilborn, 1992)

Schuler (1992) and Koonce (2001) explained that the selection process should be fair and avoids any discrimination. Enough care to organize job-related tests helps achieving a proper selection. Orientation and training to the minorities helps in the transition of an employee from outsider to an insider. All employees are to be encouraged to embrace diversity with the help of diversity training which helps all employees see the value in diversity. The organizations need to install flexible work environment and see that individuals are motivated. There are more chances of cost reduction as it increases the chances of flexibility in the organization. The organization always has an immediate access to problem solving through easy transfer of knowledge and better marketing structures. When the work environment is more creative, the organization gains immediate outcomes. With this, the organization gets the ability to attract and retain talented employees. (Adler, 2003)



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, the following recommendations are presented to tackle the issues arising out of workplace diversity:

1. The resistance to change has to be removed with the process of inclusion. This can be done by involving every employee in formulating and executing diversity initiatives in the workplace. An attitude of openness has to be fostered by encouraging employees to express their ideas and opinions and attribute a sense of equal value to all.
2. The leadership positions should not be held back for any particular category of people and diversity has to be promoted from this position itself. The Diversity Training should be utilized as a tool to shape the organizational diversity.
3. The global economy encourages a global workforce. The transparent discussion with employees regarding the benefits of having a diverse workforce promotes an inclusive and supportive work environment.
4. Proper care should be taken at the time of recruitment, selection, promotion and retention so that people belonging to various groups are made of part of the organization. The individual skills of an employee have to be valued along with his/her language skills that may help to broaden the organization's market and business connections. Enough steps to prevent the discrimination and harassment at workplace have to be initiated and implemented.

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