

Managing Diversity

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How does one manage diversity? This question has been dealt with on many diversity programs, and usually brings up oversimplified and superficial answers; e.g. by promoting tolerance, by getting people to communicate, by getting people to understand each other's cultures, etc.

If one accepts diversity concepts such as 'identity-forming' and 'discrimination' being natural human processes, then it becomes hard to believe that any of the mentioned answers would actually help in dealing with diversity. But if these are not the answers, then what is?

The truth is probably that nobody really knows how to manage diversity. Years of research and management practice have not produced anything substantial to date. Very few success stories have been recorded and where success is recorded, it is often short-lived. All living organisms on this planet are in constant battle for survival, those who evolve the fastest stay at the top of the food chain. South African parents will testify that most of their children prefer American clothes, American movies, American music, American food, etc. There seems to be a burning desire to be part of the winning group, the group who controls the resources. How does a manager, manage people to whom the processes of identity forming and discrimination is as natural as breathing?

Maybe it would help us to understand that the diversity coin has two sides. Our world seems to be made up of difference, but deep down each and every object and subject is made of the same particles. It's a scientific fact that we are all connected. When you die you don't simply disappear, instead your body is transformed into something else, most likely ground which will give birth to other life forms such as plants. This is the cycle of life that we all know so well. In the previous article we spoke of the force of evolution and the constant battle for survival that it brings about. But there is another very powerful force, called entropy.

Entropy is the second law of Thermodynamics which states that the natural flow of energy is always from a higher to a lower level. It never happens the other way around, in other words energy cannot flow from a lower level to a higher level. Thus, the less we do the quicker entropy moves in. Leave a piece of wood without care and it will soon be swallowed by nature. But if you put effort into the wood, varnish it and protect it against bad weather, its form is sustained much longer than usual. The same is true for organizations. Stay behind and you don't make it. Work, unfortunately is not enough to beat the strong force of entropy, there is another very powerful component needed. This component is difference.

Think again of the cycle of life. From soil grows grass, which the antelope eats, and eventually a lion will eat the antelope. Yet, even the lion dies and becomes soil again. This is how the force of entropy is beaten, through difference and sameness. It is the difference of life forms that make the continuation of life possible, and the sameness of the microscopic stuff that all living organisms are made of that enables the lion to become ground again.

For organizations to survive they need to constantly transform. This transformation is only possible through letting the power of difference do its work. Maybe we can now begin to understand the pain that organizational transformation brings about. Organizations work very hard to create culture. Sameness through dress codes and other rituals are constantly promoted; then all of a sudden come the request for transformation. These people have worked so hard to be the same, and now they must change form. The key component needed for transformation is difference (diversity), and it is exactly this component that the group has worked so hard at losing.

The argument thus far has been extremely philosophical. The question, how does one manage diversity, remains unanswered? What we know is that a key component for growth, evolution, change and transformation is difference. We thus know that there is power in diversity (difference).

The process of managing diversity:

As a manager you know that you need to contain and stimulate difference, since it is a key component in growth and change. You also know that the forming of collective identity and discrimination are natural processes. How do you deal with this?

One way is to constantly contain the difference in the group, process this difference and then give it back to the group when they are ready for it.

Unfortunately this method of managing diversity requires a manager who has achieved a high level of personal growth and has a strong internal locus of control. The skill of being a good facilitator will also be a plus point.

Let's have a closer look at the steps.

Containment:

This basically entails that as figure of authority you are prepared to take the group's issues of diversity, without resistance, and work with it for a while. The greatest threat of effective containment is probably the vulnerability of any manager to be contaminated by issues of the group. Think of a white manager having tea with some white subordinates. Suddenly a subordinate colleague makes a racist joke. The manager laughs, and with this laugh subconsciously indicates his/her identification with the connotation projected by the joke. How will this manager now later effectively (and legitimately) contain issues of racism amongst subordinate colleagues? It's simply not possible.

One of the most important skills involved with effective containment is self-knowledge. A black subordinate colleague might complain to a black manager about issues of racism. This black manager has also been discriminated against many times. His/her inability to separate his/her own issues from the group issues might cause him/her to see this group issue as a

golden opportunity for advancing his/her own crusade. S/he is thus not containing the group's issue of discrimination, but rather using the group to deal with his/her own unfinished business.

Reframing:

People who struggle with diversity issues usually do it from an emotional frame. This often results in the issues being full of distortions, deletions and generalizations. It's the manager's responsibility to help the employee frame his/her issues correctly. An employee could make the remark that all men in this department are obnoxious pigs. The manager can then ask the question 'all men?' This could help the employee to frame her opinion more correctly.

Processing:

This is where strong facilitation skills come in. Processing mostly entails deep listening, in order to understand the issue of diversity that the group is working with. The greatest danger in processing the group's diversity issues is that many managers only understand the group's issues on content level. In order to really get to the bottom of things the manager needs to understand both at content and emotional levels.

Understanding that sexist remarks are made towards women employees is not enough, the manager needs to grasp the anger, frustration and other emotions that such diversity issues bring about. By allowing the group to help you understand both the content and emotion of the diversity issue that they are working with, will create psychological space for them to deal with this. It will also prepare them to own up this issue and deal with it themselves.

Empowerment:

This is the step where you empower the group to own up and work with their own issues. This is also the most sensitive step of all steps. A manager, who does not know when a group is ready to take back their issue of diversity, can easily worsen the situation. The skill lies in knowing when a group is ready to own up their issue. This is made possible through adequate processing of the issue. If enough time is spent on the processing of such an issue, the manager should be able to see enough signs of a group being ready to take back and deal with their own issues.



Example:

The following simple example should help you understand the management of diversity through containment, reframing, processing, and empowerment. In the example a black male employee by the name of Siphon complains to an Indian female manager, named Jenna about issues of racism at the workplace.

- Shipo:* Miss Jenna I've made this appointment to speak to you about the discrimination, taking place at our workplace.
- Jenna:* Would you like to sit down and talk about this? (Jenna now shows that she is prepared to contain this issue. It would be good if she uses the time to consciously separate her issues from the groups. She might say to herself. 'I'm not dealing with my issues regarding discrimination, but with the groups')
- Shipo:* Thank you. The issue I'm referring to here is the accusation by the white employees that the cups in the tearoom are being stolen.
- Jenna:* All the white employees are complaining? (The processing starts. With this question she helps Shipo to frame his issue correctly)
- Shipo:* No, the one complaining is Hendrik, but we know that he is the mouthpiece to the whites.
- Jenna:* In which way do you feel are Hendrik and his friends discriminating against you? (Again she helps Shipo frame his issue correctly)
- Shipo:* Well I'm the one working with the tea, and I'm in charge of the cups. I thus know that they are implying me in this matter.
- Jenna:* Have they accused you specifically? (Still helping him to frame his issue)
- Shipo:* No, but being black, I know that whites automatically see us as thieves. They've already judged me, just because I'm a black man.
- Jenna:* What I hear is that you feel discriminated against. I also get the feeling that you are frustrated to be in this position, and that this feeling you have has a long history. (Jenna has now left the issue of the cups and is helping Shipo deal with his issues of diversity. By trying to understand both the content and the emotion regarding Shipo's issues gives him the psychological space to consciously deal with it. This processing can take a while, and Jenna will have to contain it long enough until there is evidence that Shipo is ready to own up, and work with his own issues.)

The process can now continue for a while. Jenna will now facilitate a process whereby Shipo can frame and process his issue to a point where he can own it up totally. She becomes a soundboard and a mirror, but never giving advice or taking responsibility for Shipo issues.

Jenna: Shipo it seems to me that there are two issues here. The one has to do with teacups, and the control over it. To me this is an easy issue, since together we can work out a system where more control is exercised over the cups. The second issue seems more difficult to deal with since it is about your experience of being a black man, and your perceptions of how white people relate to you. How do you think you will be able to work with this problem? (Jenna is now starting to give back Shipo's issue, and she will carefully listen to his response since it will indicate his readiness to deal with this issue by himself.)

Shipo: I think that you should call in the whites and talk to them. Tell them that they should not see all blacks as thieves. (Shipo tries to make this issue the managers responsibility, and does not yet own up).

Jenna: If I do this will it take away the frustration and other emotions that you experience in terms of black/white relationships?

The conversation can now move in a direction that will help Shipo deal with his own issues regarding diversity. The only solution to dealing with issues of diversity is an inside-out approach. Start with the self, and mostly there will be no need to go anywhere else.

Although this is a simple example, and as managers you probably need do deal with much more complex diversity related issues, we can nevertheless learn from this example. Following are some learning points...

How would the 'untrained' manager deal with this situation?

- There would be a much larger focus on the teacups. Once the teacup disappearance issue has been sorted out the manager would be satisfied.
- The whole process would be much shorter. The 'average' manager thrives on quick fixes; s/he is prepared to trade off short-term benefits for long-term dis-benefits.
- The 'average' manager would give a quick solution and offer more advice, thus taking responsibility for Siphos issue. By facilitating a process whereby Siphos can find his own answers the manger will be empowering both Shipo and herself. On the other hand the 'busy' manager who quickly sorts out Siphos problems will not only be dis-empowering both Siphos and herself but would also be creating future problems. The time saved on this issue will eventually be claimed back with interest.

What are the problems relating to this approach?

- It takes time. Busy managers will simply say that there is no time for this touchy feely stuff. Unfortunately the truth is that when not dealing with this touchy feely stuff, they tend to grow into monsters that could cause a lot of damage. 99% of managers spend 99% of their time trying to avoid difficult issues by providing quick fixes.
- You will get resistance. Most people do not want to own up and deal with their issues. They also do not want you, the manager, to facilitate a process that will empower them to own it up and deal with it. In stead they want you to take their side and punish the 'perpetrators'. Unfortunately by doing this you could only be adding petrol to an already burning fire.

- It takes practice. Managing diversity in this way is not easy; it takes a lot of practice and discipline. But the personal growth involved might just be extremely rewarding.
- It requires a great deal of introspection. The manager should know and understand his/her own issues relating to diversity.

What are the benefits of this approach?

- It has a long-term focus. Managers will empower their organizations to effectively deal with future transformation and change.
- The outcome of this approach is empowerment. The employee will learn that the manager is not an all-powerful godlike figure that knows everything. Instead the employee will learn that he/she has power within him/herself to adequately deal with own issues.
- The approach enhances difference. With this approach diversity is not tolerated, instead it is celebrated. By containing, reframing, processing and giving back the manager shows that it's OK to be different. The manager gives the message of 'I am available as a facility that you can use to explore your difference'.

How do I manage diversity? As you can see this article offers no easy answers. The journey of finding the power of difference belongs to you.

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