EPREUVES D'ADMISSION

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The top 5 challenges faced by managers of culturally diverse teams

by Finn Majlergaard, for Gugin international business consulting firm

The Gugin research unit has recently conducted a survey on what managers of cultural diverse teams find most challenging. We used a broad definition of "cultural diverse" so it wasn't limited to diversity in national cultures. The cultural challenges we identified seemed to be fairly genetic, which falls in line with what we have experienced from working with more than 600 organisations around the world.

1. Understanding why people behave differently than expected

Most of the managers who participated in the survey have been managers for several years before they had to manage a culturally diverse team. They have been used to managing a group of people who shared the same norms, values and basic assumptions in life. Our behavior is always an expression of our values, so when you are managing people from a different culture you have to be aware of their norms and values in order to understand their behaviour. Developing that understanding is the most challenging task managers of culturally diverse teams are facing according to our survey.

2. Avoid getting frustrated and angry

We always compare other people's behaviour with our own norms and values. If the behaviour makes sense we accept it but if it doesn't, we reject it. Sometimes that rejection leads to frustration and hostility. As a manager you should of course avoid showing frustration or hostility towards your employees. It is, however, a challenging task according to our survey. The reason why we end up frustrated and hostile is because we often interpret other people's behaviour incorrectly. An example: If you value always being on time you will get frustrated if some of your team members are notoriously late. Because they are usually late for appointments you might start adding attributes to their personality which are not rooted in reality but solely matches your perception of people who are always late. Instead of building a tower of prejudices, try to mobilize curiosity with the purpose to uncover the underlying norms and values. When that has been achieved you might be able to reconcile the opposing views on time orientation.

3. Motivating a culturally diverse team – Challenges and opportunities

What we regard as motivation is closely related to culture and it is often the case that what serves as a motivation factor in one culture is de-motivating people from another culture. Very often companies have single-threaded motivation and reward systems based on the norms and values from where the company was originated. When you expand to other

cultures and you bring along your motivation system you might experience a decline in efficiency and employee satisfaction because other people might feel de-motivated by factors that you find extremely motivating. An example: Some people find it highly motivating having a huge influence on how to organise their own job. They like to know what to deliver and enjoy the freedom to figure out themselves how, when and where to get the job done. Other people however will feel extremely uncomfortable with that "freedom", because they will expect their manager to tell them how to do their job. In extreme situations nothing will be done until a detailed roadmap and job description has been provided.

4. Achieve the desired level of efficiency

A great deal of the respondents felt that it was difficult to reach the desired level of efficiency in their multicultural team because too much time is spent on sorting out misunderstandings, setting expectations and making everyone on the team pursue the same goals. The reason why this issue ends up on this list is because we initially only see one definition of efficiency. An example: In Gugin we often help our clients improve the decision processes in multicultural teams because there are different views on what efficiency is. Some people like to make decisions quickly and move on, while others take the time to analyze the situation thoroughly, consult their team and then make their decision. People who like to make decisions fast regard the consensus-oriented people as slow and inefficient. But research has shown that people who take individual decisions more often have to re-think their decisions more than people who opt for collective decision making. So the collective decision making might take longer time, but it is of better quality. In reality we need both types of decision-making process, so reconciling the two views will lead to increased organisational effectiveness.

5. Lack of proper training on managing a cultural diverse team

Finally, the cross-cultural managers feel that they need the right tools to manage and lead a culturally diverse team. Managing diversity is an important add-on to the management skills they already have. Culturally diverse teams impose challenges but also a lot of opportunities. If you are not trained to deal with this aspect of leadership you miss a lot of opportunities and you might ignore some cultural challenges that can disturb your goals and objectives.

Responding to the challenges of cultural diversity

By Stephen Migiro, Professor of Finance **at the University of South Africa's (UNISA) Graduate School of Business Leadership (SBL)**

So what can managers do to respond to these challenges?

Of a number of strategies that can be adopted by managers seeking to benefit from diversity, the most prevalent are Leadership and Organisational Policy, Organisational Research on Diversity; and Training and Development on diversity.

Envisioning change in a culturally diverse organisation and driving its implementation is the primary responsibility of managers in organisations. Managers should take strong personal stands on the need for change, role model the behaviours required for change and assist with the work of moving the organisation forward. Past research has identified characteristics of leaders which are also important in managing diversity. These characteristics include personal openness, approachability, emotional intelligence, empathy, strategic thinking, strong internal locus of control, capacity to trust, being prepared to challenge, and inspiring others. Diversity should form part of corporate strategy. Human resource practices such as recruitment, training, performance management and compensation should be adapted to respond to diversity related issues.

The organisation's policy is an important determinant of success when implementing diversity initiatives. Top management support should be manifested through the inclusion of diversity in corporate strategy. If there is a mismatch between formal and informal organisation practices and values, target individuals may become cynical about formal diversity initiatives. Little behaviour and attitude change is likely to occur when the organisation's diversity goals are not perceived as serious.

Lastly, diversity-related challenges in the strategic business units of corporate bodies may be addressed through the establishment of common rooms in organisations to serve as ice–breaking venues; establishment of clear communication channels, participatory decision making, team building exercises away from work, and involvement of employees in motivational, leadership and behavioural workshops, as part of diversity training and development.

(The exercise is on the following page)

Exercise

Imagine you are an HR manager working in a large company based in France that has a multicultural workforce but that does not have a clear policy for managing cultural diversity. In a recent survey on the subject, company employees gave the following answers in terms of what they think the benefits of cultural diversity are within a workplace:

Survey on primary benefits of a diverse workplace

83% think that a diverse workforce improves our ability to engage a diverse client base and succeed in a wider number of markets

82% think that a strategic approach to managing diversity can provide our organisation with an enriched talent pool

80% think that effective diversity management can yield a competitive advantage in labour markets

79% think that diverse teams can produce better, more creative ideas because of synergy among contrasting approaches

32% think that diversity management is mostly about avoiding discrimination and maintaining compliance with legal requirements

30% think that the senior leadership fully recognises the value of a diverse workforce and strives to embed diversity into our culture

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Keeping the challenges and approaches identified in above in mind, as well as the results of your own company's survey, write to the CEO of your company outlining some practices, policies or initiatives that you think will help the company to better manage cultural diversity.