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Diversity In The Workplace

Understanding Different Cultures

The Miriam-Webster Dictionary defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social groups.” In reality, these “groups” can be very broad e.g. the culture of a particular nation, encompassing millions of people; in contrast they can also be very narrowly defined e.g. the culture of an individual, family, or neighborhood which can have its own vocabulary, traditions and rituals.

While culture can be as varied and unique as the number of human beings who walk this earth, there are also certain universals to be found across human beings. One such is our need to express ourselves using language – both in verbal and non-verbal communications. Human societies growing at different locations and times throughout history have mostly all developed sophisticated principles of communication – recorded languages with rules, which often overlap. The word for mother in most recorded languages includes the “m” sound, not coincidentally a sound which is easiest for a baby to make, when trying out its vocal chords and learning how to use its lips for the first time; *Mum, Moter, Mor, Ama, Amee, Ane* in languages as broad as Hindi to Lebanese illustrate this point. Even beyond written and spoken communication, the concepts of non-verbal communications further explain these universals. The very fact that it is possible for two individuals from vastly different locations, languages and cultures to be

able to communicate is proof enough. The sounds of laughter when happy, tears when sad are things that bind each of us to the larger whole of humanity and then it become impossible to deny the existence of some elements of universal human culture.

Core Values of United States

When considering the United States of America, there is a distinct culture this country possesses. Much of this culture was derived from the events leading up to its creating and the documents drafted at that time. In challenging the unfair policies of the British Monarchy, the US declared independence from the British, and asserted their individual rights to freedom. “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal” are the opening words of the Declaration of Independence - this is a fundamental tenant of life in the United States and is in reaction to the oppression experience under harsh taxation laws. In America, theoretically all individuals are granted equal opportunity to enjoy “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” One of the most iconic symbols of the US is the Statue of Liberty in New York City – and this reinforces the fact that Freedom is a very deeply ingrained part of US Culture.

Corporate Culture

In my opinion, *Corporate Culture* is about the philosophy and values of corporations – their priorities, the ways in which clients and employees are treated, the speed and manner in which work is done, the vocabulary and grammar used in communications, the methods used to communicate, the appearance and belief systems of individuals who participate in this culture. Often corporate culture is defined by the pursuit of

profits, involving complex managerial systems and technology to streamline communications and action plans.

Personal prejudice and Institutional Racism

Personal prejudice has to do with individual belief systems and experience, which inform a person's viewpoint. In contrast, Institutional racism or sexism has to do with the collective culture of the organization broadly, unfairly targeting a group of people because of their race or gender. For example, in the in 1930s, the US Property Appraisal System linked property value and eligibility of government loans with race. This resulted in Caucasian neighborhoods receiving the highest property value ratings, making white people much more eligible for government loans. Between 1934 and 1962, government-subsidized housing went to less than 2% of non-white individuals. In order for companies to demonstrate that they value diversity, it is necessary for them to find eligible employees across races, genders and faiths, and publicize that they are in favor of equal opportunities.

Diversity In The Workplace

In my own experiences with work place diversity I feel I benefit from having worked in two different continents, India and the United States. As a manager with over a decade of experience, I had the unique opportunity to work in the both eastern as well as western work environments and learn how to build relationships, trust and rapport with my team members from diverse backgrounds. While India is one big country and it is easy to generalize about its culture and people, it is actually extremely diverse. People from different regions speak vastly different languages, dress differently, consume

different food, believe different things and so tensions often arise because of these conflicts in culture. As a manager, it was my responsibility to build, guide and nurture a team of diverse individuals – much of this involved resolving issues caused by the vastly different cultures of my team members. In a particularly challenging incident involving several team members ganging up on another member, sentiments were expressed that did not respect cultural diversity and workplace tolerance and respect. The simple disagreement manifested itself in terms of a dislike for who this person was and where they came from: “I do not see any reason why I have to work with an individual who has nothing common with rest of us” voiced one of my team members. I used this incident as a teachable moment, highlighting the importance of the collective work effort. Initially my efforts were in vain, with individual team members not willing to listen or understand my perspective. In not giving up and pressing this point however, I was able to draw on incidences and experiences that united these individuals – their mutual love of cricket, their mutual concern for the well being of their children and concern for their children’s progress in school. In highlighting these commonalities, they began to see one another as connected human beings as opposed to strangers. The more they talked, the more they became aware that their conflicts arose because of their isolationist behaviors and attitudes. When the floodgates of communication were opened they were able to understand each other and new creative ways to work as a team were identified.

There is no question that building a diverse and inclusive team is an enormous challenge – even if on the surface there is similarity between team members. However, diversity helps bring diverse talents together working to achieve a shared goal and increases the productivity. In tapping into the collective universal human culture, a great deal of progress can be made.

CITATION

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