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Exclusive workplace systems

With more and more organisations across the globe facing the challenge of diversity management, Kurt April, Amanda April and Vibha Sharma look at the negative effects on employees who experience discrimination and exclusion in the workplace.

Although diversity is widely emphasised as a progressive and refreshing quality for organisations in an increasingly global and cosmopolitan world, contemporary diversity management tends to stereotype individual origins and behaviour. This occurs in an attempt to simplify the complicated and contentious issue of successfully introducing true diversity into the workplace. Most diversity literature has been written from a political and policy standpoint.

However, an evolving workplace discourse is emerging that has focused our attention on how diversity operates in organisations, economic efficiency, the nature of professions and broader institutional settings. Nevertheless, by focusing only on fixed, essential group characteristics, such thinking serves to control mainly less-powerful employees (for example foreign workers).

Extending the discourse

Social systems are produced by people's interactions, and desirable social systems require all system members to have awareness and understanding of the psychological processes that underpin individual purposes, values and ultimately discretionary effort. Understanding this process requires clarification of the role of power and identity in the transformation of collectives into social systems.

Ashridge-sponsored research involved 243 interviews, concluded in 2007 in various workplaces and with a wide variety of individuals in South Africa. The research analysis unearthed a number of diversity themes, but we have chosen to focus on the negative psychological effects which foreign employees experience in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The context of these research interviews is significant, as resonances of the social discrimination and exclusion suffered by the black and coloured population and women (black and white) during Apartheid, still remain, and are therefore major transformation focus areas of the South African workplace. However, little to no attention is given to the impact and undesirable properties of South Africa's history, or on the psyche of foreign employees in the country.

From our research, we note that many South African organisations have, on the one hand, failed to create the necessary opportunities for individual/self and group reflection and, on the other, failed to increase flexibility and capacity in the system for appropriate generative, recursive and inclusive psychological learning and action (emanating from such co-reflection). As a result, many organisational environments have become combative for foreign workers, and ultimately static from a sustainable competitive point of view, expressed in our interviewees' comments.

Distrust

Anxiety, resulting in the foreign employee's mental and physical distancing from the South African employer, emerged as a major theme during these interviews. It was particularly the case when such distrust in authority figures has been exacerbated by previous (Apartheid) and recent unfair treatment of themselves, or others like themselves, i.e. foreigners (*"I now avoid people or situations that make me feel uncomfortable"*). Such wariness of certain authoritative individuals in the workplace logically resulted in foreign employees sometimes working anti-social hours (*"I interact less and often try to do my work when no one is around, like early in the morning or after hours"*) in order to work in a lonely environment where they did not feel intimidated by the power imbalance. This arguably widened the gulf between managers and foreign employees, fortifying the manager's position as the 'authority figure' and legitimising the command-and-control relational hierarchy. One interviewee criticised the common practice of the *"superior telling the worker what to do and the worker obeying without question"*.

While it could be argued that maintaining distance from authority could at times be positive, encouraging independence and the use of initiative, it also made interviewees feel less comfortable in, and less attached to, the organisation – often resulting in (dysfunctional) communicative effects (*"I have become extra careful during conversations at work"*). In addition, it was clear that one bad experience with a South African colleague meant that foreign workers tended to expect the same from other South Africans, creating a long-term gulf of distrust and paranoia. One interviewee stated that a negative encounter *"pushes me away from having a close relationship with my colleagues. I start judging them. Today if I feel that someone has the same negative attitude as my first colleagues, I try to avoid that person"*. Interviewees often spoke of negative experiences involving

their feelings of inadequacy, and their consequent need to (over) prove their ability and worth to those higher up in the organisational structure. Distancing fuelled by anxiety and consequent resentment meant that many interviewees felt uncomfortable in the presence of top executives (*"feeling on the spot to answer a question"* and *"feeling as if I have to have an answer for everything, every time a senior person questions me"*). Many of those interviewed complained of persistent questioning by the management as to their progress, causing them to feel distrusted and doubt their own capabilities to fulfil their job requirements.

Instrumentalism

Many interviewees felt that the language barrier and cultural differences meant that they were dehumanised as individuals into company resources, with set tasks to fulfil (*'production line'* mentality). Such instrumentalism was enhanced by the transactional relationships with South Africans, as they did not enquire or appear interested in the history and culture of the foreign workers. In fact, some interviewees claimed that this was only the case for foreigners from other African countries, as South Africans appeared extremely interested in all things European. While such de-individualisation is clearly negative, interestingly some individuals felt that it was a small price to pay to avoid the discrimination they felt they would have suffered if their individuality was focused upon by managers and employers. It was therefore more *"effective not to be noticed"* than being *"the special case, who always needs considering and for whom exceptions had to be made"*. One female employee consequently stated that she finds it *"easy being in a foreign country where I have anonymity"*. This perceived benefit, however, did not prevent the majority of foreign employees in this situation from feeling over-managed (because of perceived risk) and, therefore, that their individuality was stifled and their identity treated as undesirable. A male interviewee stated that the *"the lack of respect in my work environment resulted in me not actively contributing to the work environment, and feeling psychologically disconnected"*. While this led to a lack of motivation and isolation from his work/workplace due to resentment, in many cases feeling undervalued contributed to employees doubting their own self-worth and ability. It was often stated by interviewed foreign employees that their company's cold, goal-orientated approach made them feel *"insignificant, used and inconvenient... a token, as if I don't have a brain"*.

This was often intensified by the lack of voice and lack of support for new foreign employees when they entered their jobs. New careers became riddled with insecurities due to employees remaining uninformed about the nature of their company and employment duties. Their lack of social mixing outside of the workplace left them ignorant and sceptical of South African values and identity. One interviewee mentioned how he was forced to assert his own initiation into his new company due to a lack of structural support: *"For two weeks I was on my own and miserable until I approached one of them, who helped in sharing the necessary information for my new job"*.

Inadequacy

The lack of nurturing of, and support for, employees can be partly attributed to the attitude of certain contemporary companies, particularly those involved in manufacturing and production (a growing sector in the economy). As such jobs tend to require few qualifications, and wages are relatively low, foreign interviewees stressed that companies regarded their workers as easily dispensable (*"take it or leave it"* and *"somebody else will fill your shoes"*) and as cogs-in-a-machine. Companies of this nature are mainly concerned with the development of previously disadvantaged South Africans and with the short-term

performance of the company. They are generally uninterested in investing in the long-term social capital, heterogeneous innovation and social cohesiveness of South African and foreign workers – which would be necessary to sustain the future competitive advantage of the company. The arguably narrow focus of affirmative action programmes within the workplace simply exacerbates the situation, with many employers embracing diversity because it improves their local image: not necessarily because they feel it is morally right or necessary for competitive sustainability. Thus, foreign employees especially are often made to feel as if they should be grateful when they receive certain jobs. A female employee spoke of how she had been made to feel unworthy of her new post: *"My manager would see me as an empowered person [affirmative action employee] who has been done a favour by being given a position. He would see me as one of the people adding to his statistics of balanced race and gender."*

Feelings of one's inadequacy or doubting one's rightful place in a hierarchical organisation often, as our interviewees report, lead to deference due to anxiety or individual expectation. The paternalistic, Christian-National dominant mode of leading by senior managers and executives in South Africa carries with it a number of assumptions: senior managers and executives are like *"fathers to the organisation, while workers are, and should behave as, children"*; *"leaders are in the know and have the solutions, and followers should act without question"; "education means that one is more of a human than those who are not... and therefore entitled to more"; "anything and anyone from Europe carries more weight and credibility"*; and *"younger people should be seen and not heard"*. One interviewee talked of *"swallowing pride and keeping quiet in an attempt to divert attention or diffuse the moment. This is behaviour that younger employees are often expected to exhibit as a matter of course."* This commonly resulted in a victimisation mentality where employees felt that speaking up, and being assertive when it was expected or required, would expose them to discrimination – ultimately leading to a form of learnt helplessness and unwillingness to take responsibility, for psychological protection.

Victimisation

Employees suffered from victimisation in numerous forms, amongst which condescension was prevalent (*"He criticised me for mispronouncing 'pronunciation'"*). Feeling victimised was indeed more common amongst foreign female interviewees, as their gender was often perceived as more vulnerable and less capable by their male counterparts, within the male-engendered South African workplace. During Apartheid (and still currently in many organisations), women had not only racial, xenophobic, ageist and disability-related prejudices to contend with, but also discrimination due to gender. As a consequence, many felt excluded and marginalised in the workplace. Many foreign female interviewees spoke of feeling unimportant in decision-making, as they were rarely consulted. They felt that real decision-making was actually taking place in other environments (for example, in sporting environments, in social gatherings at home, in gentlemen's clubs, etc.) that they were not privy to and then *"rubber-stamped in the workplace"*. One interviewee stated: *"In a group with only men, nobody says anything to me. I think it may be caused by the fact that I am a woman."*

Cognitive constraints resulting from intercultural misunderstanding interfere with workplace relations. One key dimension of such misunderstanding and feelings of exclusion emanates from language and its subsequent communicative outcomes. It sometimes was the case, in the experiences of our interviewees, that what was offensive in their culture was normal in the South African culture. One man spoke

of how these different social values meant that *"even something as simple as some of the content of his South African jokes seemed to offend most of his foreign workmates"*. A few of our foreign interviewees raised their unhappiness with feeling victimised as a result of their suspicion that South African colleagues were discussing them in a language they could not understand. A female interviewee stated that she thought *"… people excluded me as they talked Zulu or Afrikaans. I felt they were talking about me, specifically when they spoke Zulu. You cannot pick up the tone of Zulu. In Afrikaans you could."* Another stated: *"I couldn't understand the jokes and banter, because I didn't understand the context they were made in. This made it difficult to join in."* If new foreign employees are not helped/trained to understand the language and thus bridge the cultural gap, the necessary social mixing will, at best, remain superficial and inauthentic.

Many interviewees found it very difficult to adjust their behaviour to fit with the culture of their South African company without losing much of their individuality. While many attempted to do both (*"I tried basically to learn as much as I could about the culture, behaviours, way of doing things, mentality of the people, without ever losing my identity"*), the majority encountered clashes of culture which forced them to choose one approach in their workplace. One individual explained to us that he has lost all connection to his *"core"* (in other words, he no longer could be authentic), due to his constant individual adjusting of *"my modes of interaction to allow me the opportunity to build relationships and be acceptable to my colleagues… which ultimately means to be more like them"*. At worst, however, in a harsh and unaccepting work environment, a lack of knowledge regarding cultural nuances can lead to misunderstandings and discrimination.

Attachment

When followers and leaders are from different cultural groups, ethnicity may become a salient demographic characteristic that can influence their relationship. Tsui *et al*[1] found that an individual's attachment to the organisation is lower when there is a difference in race between that individual and the other members in a workgroup. This attachment factor is further negatively affected if the race is structured hierarchically within the organisation, i.e. in our South African case where most managers are white and most foreign workers are people of colour. Wesolowski and Mossholder[2] found that subordinates in leader-follower relationships that were racially diverse had lower job satisfaction when compared to homogeneous relationships. Our research has shown that ethnicity differences may be demographically and psychologically salient for those followers who identify strongly with South African cultural values. Additionally, demographic similarities such as the same real or perceived root ethnicity (for instance, white foreign workers from Europe working for white South African managers) may result in in-group categorisation and preference/favouritism.

Kim[3] asserts that communication competence is composed of three levels:
1. cognitive competence in language and knowledge of the host culture
2. affective competence to emotionally deal with and understand the hosts' emotions and aesthetic values
3. operational competence in order to select appropriate communication strategies to behaviourally interact with the host country successfully. From this we can see that high-level competence involves all-round knowledge and skills which goes beyond cultural generalisations.

Relational demography theory which postulates that people compare their

demographic features to other people's in their social groups to judge whether they are similar, provides a framework for understanding the ethnically, culturally and regionally diverse groups found in organisations. Tsui *et al*[4] has shown that the level of similarity between foreign workers and locals affects attitudes and behaviours related to both their job and their co-workers. Specifically, demographic similarity leads to attitudes such as commitment to the group, group cohesiveness, and high group evaluations. These similarities can help validate their personal values and beliefs and enhance their self-esteem. In forming their identity, individuals desire to be associated with groups that build their self-esteem, and use social and personal characteristics such as race, age, gender, regional origin, or organisational membership to create their self-identity and define their own groups. Thus, based on our interviewee responses, we can claim that the South African workplace is more accepting of and less psychologically damaging to foreign workers from European descent (as they are closer to the dominant senior management and executive class in South Africa, i.e. white English and Afrikaaner men) as opposed to foreign workers from other regions, especially Africa.

The psychological manoeuvrings in the South African workplace by the foreign worker, especially the African foreign worker (who now makes up the largest foreign worker group in the country), are often overlooked. While companies often discriminate against employees for being different – directly and indirectly – employees unfortunately often exacerbate their exclusion through feeling distrusted, overlooked and undervalued by those with authority and their co-workers. Such negative feelings naturally lead to a loss of confidence and power, causing foreigners to further distance and isolate themselves from authority. The lack of support structures for such employees, and the static

workplace culture of many South African firms, mean that those new to companies and organisations fail to understand or become incorporated into what should be a dynamic, growing and moving culture.

Conclusion

One of the most important challenges, and most significant opportunities, is the increase in ethnic and social heterogeneity. While there have been positive instances where being different in one's workplace has proved advantageous, it is clear that structures and discourses within organisations need to change, with management altering a top-down approach to one which is consultative, inclusive and communicative with all levels and forms of foreign diversity. Not in the short-term, but in the medium to long run, successful immigrant societies can help create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the initial negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities – a broader sense of "we".

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