

Diversity management in emerging economies:

*in search of a new
approach to
humanism*

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Diversity management has appeared on the global business agenda over the last 20 years – however, some leading-edge companies like SABMiller have been charting the waters in this field since the late 1970s. In the Baltics, though, as well as other emerging economies, this is still a very new concept. For the most part, unfortunately, Western companies have opted to either implement the minimum requirements, normally driven through law and legislation in a company, eg implement demographic targets to be achieved, or focused narrowly on context-relevant multi-culturalism. The fundamental flaw is that too much of the focus has been on how to efficiently box people into typically geographic cultural categories, and then seek to manage them through those lenses – as opposed to fully embracing the uncertainty of diversity.

Four fundamental questions intrigue me regarding diversity management in organisational life:

- Why has it become so important to continually focus on issues of diversity management?
- Why can't we get diversity management right?
- If we can't get it right, why do we keep doing more of the same, only with greater effort and with the same mental constructs?
- When we have eventually achieved results in diversity management, what were we actually doing? And what were our individual and collective levels of awareness of our practices at the time?

Diversity management is already an established theme in the business lexicon and managerial ideology – unfortunately evolving into yet another resource-leverage through which management, and its underpinning maximum-extraction philosophies, can seek to further exploit human potential and the myriad of possibilities which difference offers us. It is an

attempt to capture the elementary experience of “self” and “other” in the sphere of managerial control¹ – therefore treating it as yet another problem to be solved, a pathology¹ or externality which can, and must, be controlled. Unsurprisingly, women, people of colour, Africans, Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, Asians, disabled people, gays and lesbians are all treated as new phenomena, who only recently entered the workplace in the dominant business consciousness.

More often than not, diversity management is reduced to a set of rules and policies, thereby relinquishing individuals of their ethical responsibility for constructively engaging with others³. Yet, when done correctly, it is inclusive, intensely personal and engenders the suspension of ego and our narcissistic tendencies. It is the basis for attraction to others, affecting our curiosity and learning outlook, and can be a source of tension. It should lead to new forms of organisation and become the root for higher levels of inventiveness.

EMERGING ECONOMIES. Of particular importance to emerging economies and nations is the fact that the Anglo-Saxon world, as a supposed role model of industrial development, has continued to supply a steady stream of management ideas and practices. It is the unquestioning use of these Anglo-Saxon models of management that often stifles the incentive to examine critically the real needs of organisations, and nations, which are forging integrative emergence or are in high-flux transitions.

The acceptance of socio-cultural, economic and political realities in emergent organisations and nations leads writers⁴ to claim that the use of Western planning techniques cannot be assumed to guarantee any anticipated outcome, because the environment is less stable and predictable than is the case in the industrialised nations. We are reminded by the guru to Tony Blair⁶ that “strong communities can be pockets of intolerance and prejudice. Settled, stable communities are the enemies of innovation, talent, creativity, diversity and experimentation. They are often hostile to outsiders, dissenters, young upstarts and immigrants. Community can too quickly become a rallying cry for nostalgia; that kind of community is the enemy of knowledge creation, which is the wellspring of economic growth.”

Instead of constructively using the Anglo-Saxon models to help inform the design of divergent, context-relevant and appropriate constructs and frameworks in emerging economies and nations, many organisations in these parts instead uncritically opt to use convergent, Anglo-Saxon-styled diversity management practices to normalise heterogeneity through active, and purposeful, governance and “expert suppression of contradiction⁵” – thus imposing “normality” because of a fear of the unpredicable.

Diversity management often relinquishes individuals of their ethical responsibility for constructively engaging with others

DUALISTIC COMPLEXITY. There is a need to acknowledge the complex intertwining of politics and business that are inherent to many emergent economies and transitional societies, and to consider which management practices and techniques tend to contradict its combination. Although many organisations voice common-sense visions of diversity in their recruitment, talent management and retention practices, they ultimately seek to clone individuals by clarifying continually what is sought in behaviour within the organisation and by highlighting the consequences/punishment for not performing as the rest of the organisation.

This makes old HR irrelevant in the 21st century and ultimately threatens the sustainability of organisations, particularly in emerging economies and high-flux transitional societies.

How can unique individual potential be truly acknowledged, celebrated and developed if it is at the same time seen as a source of deviancy and tension, or perceived as a potential threat to normality? In South Africa, for instance, many organisational diversity management practices are actually attempts by the economically dominant white minority to both stabilise the issues of psychological emancipation of the majority people of colour and their ongoing struggle for economic equality, as well as appease their own apartheid-induced guilt. Given this country’s 300-year history of oppression, it naturally and

correctly must focus its efforts on the previously marginalised. Similarly in the Baltics, where the influx of Chinese, Turkish and Spanish nationals, for instance, are adding to the already complicated integrative process of EU membership. South Africa, in addition, faces diversity issues in the broader sense.

Management ideologies, predicated upon an abhorrence of tension, are not new – they form the basis for much of mainstream management theory. If tension is undesirable, then it must follow that diversity is also undesirable.

If management ideologies find tension undesirable, then it must follow that they find diversity equally undesirable

INSTRUMENTAL REASON. It is the supremacy of instrumental reason and what it entails in the loss of recognition of the intrinsic value of the human being which has produced the greatest split in contemporary Western society⁷. Individuals and peoples have seen themselves stripped of their identity and objectified in favour of the market.

Ultimately, there has been an accompanying loss of the genuine and open anthropological sense that quite naturally exists in human relationships of difference. Instrumental reason has become for modern human beings the overriding, if not the only, principle which determines, justifies and insists on stable and predictable social, political and economic relationships⁷. However, the sense of a difference between “self” and the “other” is a dynamic/temporal phenomenon and cannot be stabilised in formal, rational and linear categories.

Humans are existentially competent, dynamic and complex from birth² – and, in relationships, we continually and dynamically negotiate and renegotiate our multiple identities, by confirming and unconfirming self-views (not through self-categorisation, as many “cultural theorists” would like us to believe).

Boundaries between one’s “self” and “other selves” are open and expectant; we are often realising their fluidity by realising how feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity with real people with whom we live and interact change in time – the aporetic character¹ of this dynamism always being

mysterious possibilities, and only ever mitigated by notions of power between our selves and other selves.

Our identities, shaped by the actions we take as a result of our psychological- and emotional intent, the roots of our true diversity, are tied into notions of power, through purposeful alignment with in-groups and out-groups (thereby expanding or shrinking both our self-esteem and self-confidence).

POWER. Diversity management cannot be, as we commonly find in organisational life, subjugated to mere training programmes that superficially deal with multi-culturalism, being justified solely for instrumental reasons and serving to further enhance the continued soft despotism of embedded managerial dominance over every aspect of people’s lives, including civility and morality.

We should pay more attention to patterns of power, and the conscious-created contexts within which we find ourselves and our organisations, because power is central to our interaction with each other – and power emerges from the interactions of people. Power is not a resource, neither is it equally distributed. Power both enables and mutually constrains². People continuously and unconsciously sustain certain patterns of power relations. Indeed, power is almost always dependent on needs and intent (power is given and taken from others, manifesting in in-groups and out-groups, in congruence with our current, and future, intent).

As a result of the mitigating effect of intent on our power, power therefore does not always apply only to individuals – it also affects groupings (an inevitable, conscious or perceived pattern of inclusion and exclusion), and it is those patterns of inclusion and exclusion that give us our identities. Ask people who they are, and they inevitably begin explaining which groups they belong to², feel they need to belong to, or want to belong to. “I” and “we” groups cannot be separated out – so we become very passionate about the groupings to which we consciously and unconsciously belong. These grouping are usually sustained through ideology (norms and values), and ideologies make it feel more natural to operate in certain patterns of power².

If we truly want to live in a different world, we must start by being critical about our mental models, operating

authentically and becoming aware of the state we are in. We must get to grips with the repressed historical complexes which have been driving us to collective schizophrenia, and we must consider the need for cultural psychotherapies⁸. Organisations need to recover their repressed histories, understand how and why they have been constructed and distorted (in some instances), and notice how this has shaped their ideologies and behaviours.

NEW HR. Power patterns, shaped by ideology, are what human capital specialists (new HR), diversity management consultants and organisational executives should focus their attention on – to move from “understanding to control” (eg the narrow efforts of culture) to “understanding to allow tension, unpredictability and possibility”.

There is a need to debunk and/or question uncritical, single-minded focus on culture by diversity management practitioners: culture is merely one strand of the multiple dimensions which make up individual identities, and thus the multiple identities existent within an organisation.

It is far more appropriate to encourage effort and critical practice in the area of individual identity and actioned intent in moving forward the diversity management agenda.

It is the rich and varied identities of human beings which allow for the variety and multitude of ways in which we differ (whether that be in gender, socio-economic background, ways of thinking, sexual orientation, life experiences, tenure in organisations, beliefs, ethnicity, ability and disability, religion, values, upbringing, schooling and education, propensity for uncertainty and ambiguity, functional and technical specialisation, heritage, talents, family status or perspectives).

When private organisations are able to maximise the coalescence of the rich dimensions of diversity mentioned above, they will reap the benefits from the sustainable competitive advantage for which they long.

Indeed, this should be the focus of new HR – the shift from old HR to business analysts/strategists who have a flavour for people, and know how to coalesce the deep variety of identities and actioned intent in teams of dissonance, and not in teams of “like” (or falling prey to cloning and suppressing the necessary, creative tension existent in such rich diversity).

Through understanding the dimensions of society, work, identity, intent and power, we can fuller comprehend the human condition – we therefore need to preface our thinking about diversity management through the lenses of these dimensions.

It was the philosopher Heidegger who insisted that humans were fundamentally hermeneutic creatures, seeking to understand the three fundamental terms of its condition': (1) world (context), (2) finitude (possibility) and (3) individuation (wholeness) – in other words, we seek to

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critically reflect on the world, and want to be reflected meaningfully and favourably by it.

Through meaningful practice and extended language, organisations can assist individuals to make sense of their relationships with other people, perspectives, practices, institutions and landscapes – and the by-product will be a more engaged workforce, that ultimately impacts the bottom-line. ■

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