

The Impact of Culture on Diversity

by Eric Davis

Diversity. Organizations claim to strive for it. Supervisors are asked to manage it. We talk about it ad nauseam. But ultimately, does anyone really know what “diversity” means these days?

Diversity discussion has often focused on celebrating difference, promoting tolerance, or pragmatically making sure that we hire enough of this group or that group. While all of those things are worthy in some respects, diversity at its core is about people and the behavioral characteristics that guide how we interact, i.e. “culture.” To better understand this notion, let’s examine the impact of culture within our workplace organizations.

Several aspects of culture shape today’s workplace. For example, employees’ communication style, time consciousness, and work practices all stem from their cultural programming. The dominant cultural norm here in the United States dictates that business communication be specific and explicit. Meaning is found in the actual content of words with very little left to interpretation. However, in many ethnic and international cultures, communication is more implicit and indirect: meaning is found in and around the words themselves.

Mainstream American culture also teaches that “time is money,” so promptness and expediency are valued. In other cultures, relationships are more important. Have you ever worked with a colleague or client that expected you to “chit-chat” a bit before “getting down to business”? If so, you have experienced an example of cultural dissonance related to time and time consciousness.

Additionally, mainstream American culture focuses on task when it comes to work habits and practices. Employee reward here is often based on individual achievement rather than group success. In contrast, other cultures frequently place a higher emphasis on working together as a team.

It’s not just about an individual’s cultural ways of being; work groups have their own culture as well. The organizational norms and values that guide work in a university setting are very different from those in the corporate world.

Taken further, the University of Washington itself is made up of many unique subcultures: UW Medicine has a different cultural cadence than the Athletic Department.

By better understanding the cultural norms and values within their organization, leaders and their units benefit. When this enhanced comprehension becomes a way to guide efforts, hiring practices, and employee relations strategies, diversity initiatives move away from lip service and become actualized.

An honest cultural audit of your organization not only helps drive diverse policies and procedures, but goes far in the creation of welcoming workplace communities in which genuine cross-cultural interaction and respect for diversity are naturally occurring. And as an organization’s culture is identified and shared, diverse employees are more likely to express their cultural uniqueness within the context of stated organizational norms and values.

When organizational culture and individual human values work together, there can be synergy: the interaction or cooperation of two or more entities to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects. That is a definition of diversity in which we can all find meaning.

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