

## Managing Diversity in Europe

Intercultural concepts address two or more different parts – by definition. And apparently, these differences must be managed, because we are not used to deal with ‘the different’. This may be because almost every one of us was brought up and educated using sameness as a means to define ‘they and us’ and sometimes even ‘good and bad’. This kind of identity formation may lead to mono-cultures that define themselves as superior to anyone who ‘lacks’ one or more features that define the dominant group.

Usually, intercultural processes aim at coming to terms with more or less decisive (mono-) cultures, making them ‘compatible’ with others. Understanding, tolerating and accepting the different are common approaches to working ‘across cultural borders’ while identifying common ground (similarities or sameness) is another way to bridge the gap.

But it all comes back to the many ways in which we may differ or be alike. Diversity describes this reality and emphasises the fact that while we are all unique individuals, there are almost always things we have in common. In other words, differences do not only separate people — they may also unite them. Notably, this individualistic concept avoids group thinking and confrontation it may reinforce.

When people talk about Diversity in the United States, they think about gender Diversity or ethnic Diversity first – may be some other issues as well. When people talk about Diversity in Europe, they think about National Diversity or other forms of ‘cultural Diversity’. But there are certain dimensions that human beings are ‘given by nature’, those, we basically cannot change. These six core dimensions of Diversity (gender, age, ethnicity/race, (dis-)ability, sexual orientation, fundamental beliefs) are paid increasing attention, and they are also mentioned in the new article 13 of the EU treaty as potential fields for anti-discrimination. Consequently, they form the core of what Diversity management addresses in an organisational context – in the U. S. and in Europe.

Diversity aims at making the most of the many differences that make individuals unique. It may be argued that this is an extension of/to the anti-discrimination, equal opportunities and cross-cultural paradigms that have all established themselves in different arenas. But the facts that the definition of Diversity is usually very comprehensive and that it focuses on individuals (rather than groups) are regarded strong assets to overcome some of the resistance against the above concepts. But its enormous complexity makes the concept less tangible than concrete down-to-earth programmes under the above headlines.

It is one key aspect of Diversity that each individual will participate to his or her best if one feels valued and respected for all individual contribution(s). While this may well take decades on the large scale of a whole continent, Diversity can be a strong tool to increase commitment and enhance integration within a European organisation (company).

They will discover that Diversity helps improve teamwork, and cross-functional or cross-sector co-operation. And changing organisational structures and cultures (caused by M&A, re-engineering, strategic alignment etc.) will be coped with more easily. Actively valuing and

managing Diversity will also suggest a stronger focus on differences on the market side, which in turn will lead to more sensitivity for different market segments and customer needs and result in increased market penetration and improved customer intimacy.

But also NGOs and public authorities will see their success grow as their effectiveness largely depends on reaching a whole society, notably the future society which will be even more diverse than today's (following our research). Diversity helps to open up and acknowledge all facets of reality as opposed to look at a standard type of citizen mainly, while marginalising so-called minorities. Political parties, foundations, trade unions and the Media may well learn their lessons.

Frankly, managing Diversity requires quite radical changes for European organisations / companies. It is not merely a question of installing some equal opportunities programmes and some multi-cultural training. It is a question of challenging the basics (values and attitudes) of an organisation that have caused it to become what it is today. A thorough analysis will help understand that stage at the beginning of the process. And a detailed business case will help understand why a fundamental change will be a change for the positive regarding the bottom line that is. In addition to identifying the benefits that an organisation expects to reap from a fundamental change, it is worth to look at the costs that will occur if the organisation will not change.

When embedding Diversity in the strategic context of a company, the definition of concrete Diversity objectives will be easy and will aim at directly supporting the overall business goals. Installing evaluation criteria and measurement tools is advisable at that early stage as well.

Rolling out Diversity is probably another story, and certainly no one should rush into a quick-and-dirty implementation with a couple of awareness training sessions and a leaflet. We propose to combine top-down and bottom-up mechanisms to convey the fundamental messages. On a different track, Diversity should be integrated into HR and corporate communication thoroughly, meaning that it must become part of everything the company does as opposed to a separate programme or initiative.

The question remains whether this approach is an appropriate one for Europe. For a region that has not yet reached a cohesive consciousness like the U. S., where a vast variety of people is 'united' in Diversity, and where this is increasingly seen as the competitive advantage and key to success at the same time. Theoretically, Europe could easily match this Diversity, and, if managed well, emerge as the multicultural leader of the world. But this would require that not only the existing mind-sets of millions of individuals were challenged but also the value systems of many communities in Europe. Diversity may help people understand that they do not have to give up their identity, when becoming part of a bigger, diversified yet unified something to which they contribute their individual share.

The challenge – and the big opportunity – of Diversity is that it may help break up the (mostly national) group thinking in Europe, and serve as a catalyst for a variety of intercultural processes. To unleash the power of Diversity, change agents will have to understand that the essence of Diversity is universally relevant across the globe, while the context for

implementation is fundamentally different in the Americas, Europe or Asia/Pacific. And it has to be understood that no dimension – being gender or being culture – is more important than other issues that form the core of a person's individuality. Only, if acknowledged in a comprehensive and coherent context, the combination of differences will form a maximum joint force.

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