Strategies For Multicultural Management: Communication And A Common Set Of Values

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ABSTRACT

In the last 30 years, there has been a shift towards using multicultural strategies. The constant shifts taking place in multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multinational workforces indicate that both administrators of these organizations and higher education practices must evolve to adapt to needs for changing skill sets. In the future, multicultural management practices will continue to impact the way that businesses reach out to various stakeholders. Multicultural management strategies can be effective in creating a unique work environment that embraces various attributes of the culture groups comprising the workforce. To meet these challenges, leaders must be trained and educated to develop flexibility, understanding, and acceptance of alternate values when working in foreign locations or multi-national organizations. Moreover, they should be open to new ideas. Trends indicate that multicultural management strategies will become more common based on a central language, technological enhancements of communication, and establishing new traditions based on a combination of cultural values designed to reduce conflict and increase collaboration.

Keywords: Multicultural Management Strategy; Multinational Workforce

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years, multicultural management has been moving to the forefront of business discussion. Globalization and technology are bringing nations closer together. Many developing countries have begun to play an important part in multinational organizations. To have productive operations inside a particular location requires that certain cultural attributes are embraced, aligned with that culture (Gullestrap, 2009). Increasingly, organizations find that their work associates, customers, and clients include persons of other ethnicities and nationalities. As a result, a workforce comprised of persons from different backgrounds can help an organization effectively reach out to a diverse customer base and clientele (Kelly, 2009). Implementation of multicultural management strategies inside the workplace impacts a number of different industries that currently have a large foreign workforce, including tourism, customer services, IT, and manufacturing (Buhalis, 2008). Higher education entities that give students a background in these topics will better prepare them for the current and future business climate.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A major challenge for multicultural management is the different cultural beliefs, practices, and traditions that are embraced by various segments of employees (Edewor, 2010). A lack of culturally appropriate communication can create animosity and division between employees, leading to internal challenges that will hinder overall performance (Devine, 2007). The groups in the minority, whose cultural values are not as well represented, may believe that select segments are trying to impose their belief system upon them. When this happens, misunderstandings and resentment often follow (Edewor, 2010).

STRATEGIES FOR MULTICULTURAL MANAGEMENT

To meet these challenges, organizations must have effective communication and collaboration among the various segments to address cultural differences and ensure that everyone has an adequate understanding and acceptance of the cultural beliefs of their co-workers. Learning about cultural differences can foster mutual understanding that improves the work environment. This leads to a more flexible organization that can adapt to a host of issues (Devine, 2007). When this happens, a common set of attributes will more likely be embraced by the employees whose different cultural beliefs are respected and incorporated into the organization's culture (Devine, 2007). At the same time, the internet gives many regions a capacity to work together.

Cultural fit between workforce and clients/customers

Many organizations are concentrating on strategies to reach out to a larger demographic of stakeholders, including culturally and linguistically diverse clients and customers (Randolph, 2011). A movement toward multicultural management seeks to incorporate the customs and traditions embraced in other nations where segments of their workforce resides, whether direct employees or outsourced labor. A focus on integrating multicultural management strategies helps organizations reach out effectively to various segments of clients or customers and use individual employees' unique attributes to achieve the company's objectives. For a number of businesses, if the expertise is lacking, managers might choose to assign specific personnel to develop an understanding of the traditions of a particular country (Randolph, 2011) to help them more effectively adapt in a host of situations.

Intercultural communication enhanced by a common language and clarity

In the next 3 to 5 years there will be a continued focus on using a common language to improve communication in multicultural and multinational workforces, thus a variety of organizations are embracing and practicing English consistently to foster a common language within the organization (Selmer, 2012). Effective multicultural communication includes (a) clarification of meaning, rather than assumption of another's understanding; (b) direct one-on-one communication that allows feedback, rather than managers issuing edicts; and (c) promotion of general knowledge of cultural factors, but not over-dependence on cultural presumptions (i.e., stereotyping).

Intercultural communication enhanced by technology

Many businesses have become multi-national entities headquartered in one country. New communication technology allows organizations greater ease and speed of communication across continents than any time in the past. Use of time-management platforms, meeting-schedule programs, and audiovisual conferencing help coordinate and communicate between vastly separated time zones and allow uniformity of practice that can allow more efficiency in the organization. Technology-based formats offer some advantages for interaction between multicultural employees. Members of a work team discussing ideas using the company email, message boards, and social networking may benefit from the fact that written communication in an unfamiliar language can sometimes be accessed more easily than verbal communication (Duda, 2009). Technology such as translation software and language training programs can be integrated into the multinational organization to increase communication ease. Accents and colloquialisms can be reduced by using written mediums for employees to connect with each other (Duda, 2009). Implementing effective communication practices can include using technology during training and continuing education. Using technology allows more learning comprehension as it can disseminate training from high-level experts with fewer personnel hired as trainers (Laturkar, 2010).

The relative newness of these mediums allows organizations the opportunity to establish new social norms regarding their use. There is potential for a more egalitarian feel that promotes participation of some members whose cultural background might in other settings lead to less participation. Technology-based written communication mediums may also help to mitigate the possible miscommunications because they force the use of words to clarify meaning, meaning that might be miscommunicated across cultures in body language, inflection, and other nonverbal cues.

Adapting a culturally diverse workforce to a common set of values

In response to the challenges of multicultural management, some employers have emphasized certain aspects from each major cultural group and used them to create a blended culture. The organization will embrace specific attributes, integrating key ideas from the traditions embraced within a region to improve understanding and collaboration (Fang, 2010). Many businesses try to integrate general ideas with specific customs in a particular region with the existing customs of the company's nation of origin (Canen, 2008). This approach is helping businesses more effectively adapt to local markets and reach out to a larger demographic of customers (Fang, 2010). Commonly referred to as *Hofestede's cross cultural paradigm*, these attributes receive the most concentration from entities with an international focus (Fang, 2010). Over the course of time, as the workplace exposes employees to different ideas, they often become more accepting and interested in learning about new cultures (Hase, 2007). The organization becomes bi-cultural or multi-cultural as employees incorporate aspects of other cultures into their own repertoire. This merging has the potential to diminish cultural barriers that were difficult to address in the past (Brennan, 2007).

Commonly accepted ethical standards

Many business schools are combining specific management techniques with ethics and cultural training, because the underlying values for different countries will vary from one region to the next (Nelson, 2012). There is also an emphasis on creating universal standards (Nelson, 2012). Augmenting their traditions with these new standards has transformed the views on ethics inside various societies. As a result, co-workers from various cultures work effectively with each other and see how they contribute to the success of the firm (Nelson, 2012). For example, in some cultures cronyism is the norm, and it may be necessary to emphasize examples of how the organization and its stakeholders, including employees, suffer in a culture (national or corporate) that accepts practices that prevent the organization from employing the most qualified applicant for a position. It is important to emphasize that justice, fairness, and the good of the whole are universal aims; it is how we attempt to meet those goals that is subject to cultural factors.

As the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) continues toward incorporating a single set of accounting standards across International borders, international companies may voluntarily adopt the existing international standards. Even though the United States has yet to adopt the standards set forth by the IFRS to encompass a single set of reporting standards, adoption has the advantage of enhancing communication and a unified understanding of what constitutes ethical practice for multinational corporations (Harper, Leatherbury, Machuca, & Phillips, 2012).

Challenges in cultural integration to a common set of values

Paradoxically, the aforementioned enhancements to communication—by specific and formal language use as well as technological communication devices and programs—can backfire. In some cultures, formal and distant communication in a business setting has become the custom. In other cultures, institutionalized, systematic, and formal communication tends to cause apprehension, and the preference is to establish a strong personal rapport, especially through face-to-face communication. The prevalent feeling in such cultures is that trust is communicated by a friendly and informal manner. Indirect requests may feel more comfortable, while direct requests can be taken as rudeness or implied superiority. Messages that emphasize the value of the person rather than the task convey direct human-to-human understanding, which is interpreted as more authentic than systematic and concise communication.

Potential negative aspects of mismatch in communication style include communication breakdowns, a lack of trust, and unwillingness to share ideas. Loyalty and commitment can be eroded by a misfit between organization culture and national or ethnic culture. Allowed to go unchecked, this can have a negative impact on morale and lead directly to a rise in stress levels (Duda, 2009). To curtail these challenges, leaders must foster communication about differences between perspectives and practices (Duda, 2009). By respecting the views of all parties, not being judgmental, and maintaining as much of a neutral standpoint as possible, practical solutions may be arrived at, which all parties could accept as a compromise or win-win situation (Duda, 2009). Additionally, leaders should

work with employees to discuss and address cultural challenges when they first appear, before people take sides and become emotional about their position (Duda, 2009). When employees feel they are subject to cultural bullying, they negatively react to new ideas and become entrenched in their previous beliefs (Canen, 2008). The culture of a specific organization may be largely determined by the nationality that dominates the workforce or by the nationality that dominates the management. Organizations must find a balance and appropriate fit for specific strategies rather than seeing each innovation, whether in the form of technology or a theoretical model, as a must-have and one-size-fits-all solution.

Training to promote an integrated organization culture

One challenge for leaders is to foster a sense of understanding and respect for alternative ideas and perspectives. When this is achieved, the operating environment for these organizations transforms (Selmer, 2012). Various training seminars may discuss cultural attributes to improve understanding (Laturkar, 2010). Sensitivity training plays a vital role toward understanding and respect, both within the business world and in the classroom.

As a result of training within organizations, as well as prior education in the classroom, management and staff can develop a basis of cultural knowledge on which to create standards that will be widely accepted (Laturkar, 2010). Cultural adaptations can be maximized when leaders allow a certain amount of flexibility (Laturkar, 2010), while at the same time emphasizing core principles that have become the organization's accepted standards. If such practices are consistently embraced, organizations are building upon a foundation that should maximize the return for everyone (Laturkar, 2010). The mixed cultural attributes and values can then become a part of the work environment and direct how various stakeholders interact with each other (Laturkar, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The constant shifts taking place in multi-ethnic workforces indicate that both administrators of multicultural organizations and higher education practices must evolve to adapt to changing needs for multicultural skill sets. In the future, multicultural management practices will continue to impact the way that businesses reach out to various stakeholders. Multicultural management strategies can assist in creation of a unique work environment that embraces various attributes of the culture groups comprising a workforce (Buhalis, 2008; Hase, 2007). To meet these challenges, leaders must be trained and educated to develop flexibility, understanding, and acceptance of alternate values when working in foreign locations or multi-national organizations (Canen, 2008). Moreover, they should be open to new ideas. This approach will help businesses create an environment that embraces Hofestede's model (Fang, 2010). Trends indicate that multicultural management strategies will become more common based on a central language, technological enhancements of communication, and establishing new traditions based on a combination of cultural values designed to reduce conflict and increase collaboration (Selmer, 2012). These trends are important for educators to convey to students, both to prepare new business leaders and personnel for multi-ethnic environments but also to promote the emergence of new strategies for communication and cultural integration.

AUTHORS' INFORMATION

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<u>**NOTES**</u>