Managing Urban Diversity – UST 453

Managing diversity has been a significant theme throughout my life beginning in grade school. I learned at an early age that in order to develop significant relationships it is imperative to accept people and their unique qualities. Whetten, in *Developing Management Skills* says, "We don't emphasize so much *managing diversity* as we do *diagnosing individual differences* so they can be valued, understood, and appreciated" (Whetten, 2002 p. 21). This statement can be applied to both the workplace setting and also in personal relationships. Accepting the differences in others strengthens our character and opens our minds to diversity.

Attending a Catholic grade school, St. Angela Merici, from first to eighth grade taught me the principles of the Catholic religion. I lived and breathed the Catholic ideals along with all of my classmates, and this was all we knew. However, my choice to attend a public school, Fairview Park High School, changed my spirituality drastically. Ninth grade was spent in culture shock as I met people from various backgrounds. Realizing that Catholicism was the minority religion in this school was surprising. Instead of isolating myself with friends from St. Angela's, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to gain knowledge about other religious beliefs. The lesson learned was that it didn't matter if someone was Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Greek Orthodox, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic or any other faith. We all have one thing in common – the belief in a higher power regardless of the designation. I also recognized that those who do not practice any religion were not heathens like I was taught to believe. They had as much of a right to believe in nothing. It didn't make them terrible people. They were just different from what I was familiar with - different from me.

My first experience managing diversity in the workplace was at Continental Airlines. This position was truly enlightening as it allowed me to travel all over the world and personally experience distinctive cultures (A4). The people I encountered were from various backgrounds and spoke different languages. Over the years I have been fortunate enough to visit Mexico, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, The Netherlands, and Belgium, along with many destinations within the United States. Perhaps the most influential trip was my European excursion in June 1999.

I decided to visit a friend that was studying in a small town in The Netherlands called Maastricht. I took a flight to Brussels, Belgium, which was the closest airport to Maastricht serviced by Continental. From there, a two to three hour train ride would take me to my destination. I arrived in Brussels around eight in the morning to what seemed like a new world. The most noticeable difference was the obvious language barrier – German and French were predominately spoken. I knew instantly that my English and Spanish skills wouldn't be useful here, but being an "experienced" traveler I figured I could find my way around anywhere, even if communication was an issue. The architecture of the town square was stunning with buildings that are hundreds of years old. Not something that can be seen in the United States. The residents were intimidating at first but I quickly realized they weren't much different from me. We were all just roaming around trying to find something – a hotel, a train, a friend.

Looking back on this experience I appreciate the fact that I wasn't prepared to travel alone to a foreign country, especially since I didn't speak the language. My false sense of security and inflated American ego were not a benefit in this situation. However, it changed my interactions with "foreign" people in the future. I learned how to show respect for customs and

traditions and treat everyone equally regardless of age, gender, religious or cultural background. This created one of my greatest managerial skills that I would utilize throughout my career.

My management experience at Cuyahoga County Treasurer's Office has given me the most exposure to diversity in the workplace. Prasad, in *Managing the Organizational Melting Pot: Dilemmas of Workplace Diversity* says, "Despite the intense publicity surrounding the diversity movement, the process of managing diversity itself remains within something of a black box" (Prasad, 1997, p. 13). This point is significant considering the lack of set rules in managing diversity in the workplace. Whetten bolsters this statement when he says, "One reason developing management skills is difficult is because all of us possess our own unique styles, personalities, and inclinations" (Whetten, 2002, p. 21).

The employees in my department were indeed unique in their personalities, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and backgrounds. Since the department was the entry level position of the office it became sort of a melting pot of individuals. Any employee that didn't perform well in other areas was sent to work with me. The surface-level diversity, or observable demographic and other overt differences in people, was apparent with the mix of Hispanic, African American, Arab American, and Caucasian men and women. The deep-level diversity, or differences in the psychological characteristics of employees, was not as noticeable until time was spent working with them. Three of my staff members suffered from the following illnesses: schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder and diminished mental capacity. Others were dealing with depression, anxiety and health issues.

Bonnie Prince from Hocking College makes the point, "Similar to race, gender or ethnic background, persons with disabilities carry their condition with them, without choice, to the table of employment. Like those in other groups, society has assumed the disabled will not perform

adequately in the work place or will cause difficulties for the organization and therefore should be excluded, or included only if restrictions are applied" (Harvey, 1995, p. 142). In my experience it was possible for disabled employees to succeed in the workplace. With a modified management style these employees thrived.

According to Prasad, "Managers and executives are expected to be confident and aggressive, intensely competitive and tough-minded, and consistently impersonal and detached (Prasad, 1997, p. 139). While I was confident in my managerial abilities, the aggressive, impersonal and detached characteristics expected would not be successful in dealing with my special needs employees. I learned that employees with mental illness or diminished mental capacity require managers with patience and a general understanding of their condition in order to succeed. By conducting weekly meetings with these staff members I was able to make the appropriate accommodations that fostered their success in completing tasks. Dr. Joy Bodzioch explains my method when she says, "The effective coach teaches an employee to do a series of tasks of increasing complexity through a two-way communication process. As a result, the employee gradually becomes a more valuable contributor to the company and the team. An elementary principle of teaching any skill is that the teacher must start from the learner's frame of reference" (Bodzioch, 1995, p. 61).

Since my staff members performed as a group it was critical that their teamwork skills were proficient - regardless of their feelings towards each other. There was no time to waste with critical deadlines every day. Timothy Franz explains, "As the review of the theories and research about culture and diversity demonstrate, effective groups and teams must try to integrate members into the culture, must work to change the culture for positive, and must value and integrate diverse teams into the tasks where they will be successful" (Franz, 2012, p. 81). He

further states, "A team with members who have heterogeneous backgrounds is more likely to succeed at creative tasks because they bring more diverse information to the process" (Franz, 2012, p. 145).

When there was a problem with the daily work the employees would place blame on each other. In some cases an employee's gender, age or ethnic background were used to create conflict. In these contentious situations according to Lewicki there are five conflict-reduction strategies that can be applied: 1. Reducing tension and managing the de-escalation of hostility. 2. Enhancing communication, particularly improving each party's understanding of the other's perspective. 3. Controlling the number and size of issues in the discussion. 4. Establishing a common ground on which the parties can find a basis for agreement. 5. Enhancing the desirability of the options and alternatives that each party presents to the other (Lewicki, 2001, p. 208).

In order to reduce tension and hostility in the office I prepared a weekly schedule, which rotated the daily tasks of my staff members. Each week an employee would be assigned to a different task or project. This diminished the competitive attitudes between staff and promoted cooperation. It also kept the employees interested in the work. Repetition can create boredom and ultimately lead to apathy and unproductive behavior. Motivating employees was a constant battle since the work could be monotonous at times. Dr. Joy Bodzioch describes the impact of motivation when she says, "Rather than just encouraging them to work hard, the goal is empowering them – which builds employee self-esteem and inspires them to work smart. This makes it possible for diverse employees to fully use their unique talents and express their unique perspectives, thereby enabling the company to truly capitalize on workforce diversity" (Bodzioch, 1995, p. 79). If everyone was responsible for the various tasks then they wouldn't

feel that management was favoring certain employees or giving them easier tasks. They were all in it together and they were a team. No one person was better than another.

Communication was a critical aspect of the office. It was essential that employees discuss how certain functions were being performed. To improve employee interactions I made sure that employees worked with each of their coworkers – not just the same person every day or every week. I also established a policy that dealt with negative relations between employees. Immediately after the incident all those involved would meet with me to discuss what transpired. My role was mediator and I would facilitate a conversation between the employees. They would work through the problem by expressing their concerns with each other instead of ignoring the problem and allowing it to fester. This technique was used to reduce the effects of the repression of differences. Carole Parker of Saint Michael's College has said, "Repression is quite costly. Resistances develop that have both organizational and individual consequences. The process of blocking strong feelings and repressing differences may result in desensitization and a loss of productivity" (Harvey, 1995, p. 44).

During these dialogs it was also important to control the number of issues being discussed. Employees were not allowed to bring up matters that happened in the past. The current incident would be the focus and we continued until a mutual agreement could be made. In most cases both employees had to make concessions in order to resolve the conflict. It was rare that anyone walked away dissatisfied with the result. However, when an employee was unhappy, the situation had to be referred to the human resources department for further consideration.

One of the most complicated responsibilities of a management position is explaining why we want to manage workplace diversity. Many employees don't grasp the concept of collaborating with co-workers regardless of their age, race, gender or ethnicity. Women would rather work with women and men would rather work with men. As a manager I stressed to everyone on my staff that they must put in the effort. It's not easy to go outside of your comfort zone, but it was critical to the success of our office. M. J. Kirton explains the implication when he says, "The diversity of problems that need to be successfully resolved by Homo sapiens if the species is to survive…this, in part, is because every individual, as any other organism, has never-ending requirements and lives in an ever-changing environment" (Kirton, 2003, p. 202).

Dr. Joy Bodzioch further clarifies when she outlines the following benefits of capitalizing on diversity: "added recruiting opportunities with access to the best available talent, increased creative problem-solving and innovation, enhanced service to diverse customers, lower grievance, lawsuit and turnover costs, penetration of new domestic and global markets, improved teamwork and morale, and greater organizational flexibility" (Bodzioch, 1995, p. 3).

Diversity issues in the workplace are challenging. However, I believe that organizations can learn from The Dalai Lama's vision. He says, "We have to face the reality that discrimination exists. For centuries, people have been subjugated or treated unfairly simply because of their race, gender, background, or ethnic group. It takes time to eradicate those prejudices. But I believe that not only can it be done, it must be done – and that it is up to today's business leaders to take the first steps" (Dalai Lama, 2009, p. 149).

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