The role of leadership in workplace diversity management

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Abstract. Although the issue of workplace diversity management has attracted the attention of many researchers and practitioners, studies on the role of leadership in workplace diversity management are still limited especially in developing nations, Nigeria inclusive. The objective of this paper is to examine the role of leadership in workplace diversity management and to contribute to the field of cross-cultural management. The paper utilizes the method of qualitative analysis and synthesis of scientific literature as it relies on secondary data collected from documentations through published and unpublished books, journal articles, and conference proceedings. It also relies on the standpoint theory that a group's experiences create a general and permanent perspective of an immense situation, but without personal experiences one's standpoint cannot become truly comprehensible. The paper therefore concludes that diversity management skills are required by every organization in order to harness the resources that the employees have brought to an organization. It is the active and conscious development of strategic management processes of accepting and using differences and similarities as means of adding value to an organization.
Keywords: workplace diversity, management, leadership role, benefits, challenges

Introduction

The study of workplace diversity in recent times is important because homogeneity is very rare in all aspects of life including physical, economic, and social lives. Animals and plants have diverse species depending on their environments. The different languages we speak as well as the different mode of dressing point to the diverse nature of our existence. Diversity is therefore a common phenomenon in the family, workplace, society, and internationally.

Diversity refers to variety along many dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, marriage systems, physical features, socio-economic status, and political ideologies. Such diversity has to be managed through understanding, acceptance, and respect for each other's beliefs and behavior. Workplace diversity according to Preeti, Poonam, and Ekanshi, is "basically con-

cerned with the similarities and differences in such characteristics as age, gender, ethnic, heritage physical abilities and disabilities, race and sexual orientation among the employees of organization" [1, p. 102]. Workplace diversity management is a strategy that is intended to foster and maintain a positive and conducive workplace environment. Thus, developing a deep understanding of workplace diversity and its management is specifically essential in cross-cultural settings where employees of different cultural backgrounds come together and leaders are confronted with the challenge of managing employees of diverse values and interests [2].

Today, a growing number of progressive organizations are realizing the need for valuing diversity in the workplace, so as to ensure strategic utilization of employees for the achievement of strategic goals and objectives. Effective workplace diversity management, according to Okoro [3], is a key global business success. This is because workforces are becoming progressively multicultural, and the need to understand diversity is extremely important to operate as effectively as possible. Thus, it is essential that organizations develop an effective way to manage diversity to gain a competitive leverage since it is seen as a factor of success [3–4]. The aim of workplace diversity management is to foster unity in diversity by ensuring respect for individual differences among employees. Leadership plays an important role in unifying diverse groups with differing perspectives and interests in the workplace. Hence, adequately managing a multicultural workplace within an organization in recent times is of increasing concerns of organizational leaders. Thus, the objectives of this paper are to examine the role of leadership in workplace diversity management and to contribute to the current feed of cross-cultural management.

Methodology

The paper utilizes the method of qualitative analysis and synthesis of scientific literature as it relies on secondary data collected from documentations in published and unpublished books, journal articles, and conference proceedings, and were content-analyzed in relation to the scope of the paper. A systemic review of literature on the role of leadership in workplace diversity management is made.

Conceptual Clarification

Leadership

Leadership is particularly of huge importance in groups, societies, management, and organizations because of its far-reaching effects on the attainment of goals and objectives. In fact, the success or failure of an organization is often attributed to effective or poor leadership [5]; this is because of the widely held belief that resourceful leaders do make a positive difference and a significant impact on the work performance of individuals, groups, organizations, and the overall achievement of set

goals and objectives. For instance, Bolman and Deal opined that leadership is "universally offered as a panacea for almost any social problem. Around the world, middle managers say their enterprises would thrive if only senior management provided real leadership. A widely accepted Canon holds that leadership is a very good thing that we need more of, at least, more of the right kind" [6, p. 294]. Similarly, it is affirmed that "an organization can have the environmental advantages in the world, strong financial resources, available market position and state-of-the-art technology and still fail in the absence of leadership. Without it, environmental advantages melt away and the organization, like a driverless car, runs downhill" [5]. Therefore, the assumption by most scholars that without leadership no organization can accomplish its policy goals or vision can be considered generally valid. What then is leadership?

The term "leadership" appears to have come from an Anglo-Saxon noun "lad" that means a course, a way and a path which is to lead, or mark, a sense of direction. From the foregoing, leadership may be defined as someone who shows others the way. According to Deretomode, leadership is "an art or process by which a member of a group or organization persuades, inspires influence the attitude, behaviour and actions of others and directs their activities so that the group or organizational members work willingly, cooperatively and enthusiastically towards the accomplishment of set goals and the new and improved position" [5]. In a similar vein, Morphet, Johns, and Reller posit that leadership is "the influencing of the actions, behaviors, beliefs and goals of one actor in a social system by another actor with the willing cooperation of the actor been influenced" [6, p. 97]. In Stogdill's opinion, leadership is "the process of influencing the activities of an organized group towards goal settings and goal achievement" [7, p. 4]. In the context of this paper, we define leadership as a process whereby an individual influences orders or followers so as to accomplish set goals or objectives.

According to Abah, leadership is "an important aspect of managing group" [8, p. 88]. Managers must exercise all the elements of their roles in order to combine the human and material resources in the appropriate proportion to achieve the desired group objectives. Management activities such as planning, organizing and decision-making are dormant cocoons until the leader triggers the power of motivation in people and guides them towards goals. Thus, leadership transforms potential into reality, it is the ultimate art which brings to success all of the potentials that is in an organization and its people. Therefore, without leadership, the link between the individual and organizational goals may become tenuous. The absence of leadership has the potential of leading to suboptimization in which individuals work to achieve their own goals while the overall organization becomes inefficient in achieving its objectives.

Workplace Diversity Management

Workplace diversity focuses on the difference that people bring to an organization. It includes the dimensions of influence and perspectives that employees bring into an organization. Diversity as reflected in cases like this is about learning from others who are not the same and who may not have the same perspec-

tive. This type of situations requires respect for the fundamental human rights of everyone, respect for dignity, and willingness to learn from diverse perspectives. Diversity management, according to Cornelius, Gooch, and Todd (2010, cited in [9]), is "an organizational initiative whereby organization focused on valuing differences in addition to non-discrimination and concerns on respecting every individual in the workplace regardless of their race and gender among other valuables" [9, p. 2]. Effective diversity management requires a culture which is inclusive of a work environment that nurtures teamwork, participation and cohesiveness [10]. Similarly, Back (1998, cited in [11]) posits that inclusive behavior is the foundation on which a diverse workforce can work as a single unit. Diversity management policies and programs are designed to create conducive organizational environment.

Tatlic and Ozibilgion [12] propose three approaches towards workplace diversity management. These are the liberal change model, radical change, and transformational change. These approaches emanated from the belief that managing diversity goes far beyond equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. Other management approaches need to be used as complementary means of managing diversity. The aim of the liberal change model is to have a fair labor market from which the best person is chosen on the basis of performance. The human resource management department and top management should approve rules and regulations that are aimed at encouraging fairness and non-discrimination. The liberal change model approach centers on law, compliance, and legal penalties for non-compliance. However, Cox [13] posits that former rules cannot cover every aspect of work life as there are informal aspects to work such as affinity groups and alternative informal communication channels.

In contrast to the liberal approach, radical change seeks to intervene directly in workplace practices in order to achieve a balanced workplace (in regard to all diversity dimension), as well as a fair distribution of rewards among employees. The radical approach is thus focused more on the outcome than on the forming of the rules to ensure equal treatment. One major tool of radical change is quotas which are set by business organizations or national institutions with the aim of regulating diversity in the workplace. However, the quota system has been critically discussed concerning their effectiveness. Arguments for and against the quota system in business organizations or public institutions include ideas such as quota compensation for actual barriers that prevent marginalized members from attaining their fair share of managerial positions to quotas, are against equal opportunity for all and imply that marginalized members only get positions to fill the quota [14]. Sweden's quota system for parliamentary positions is a positive case for radical change through quota setting. A quota system was introduced in the Swedish parliament with the aim of ensuring that women constitute at least a critical minority of 30 or 40 percent of all parliament seats. Since the introduction of the system in the 1970s, woman representation in the parliament has risen dramatically even above the defined quota. Today, more than 48.5 percent of the parliamentary representatives are women, the number which stands out compared to the global average of 21%.

Transformational change covers an equal opportunity agenda for both the immediate need as well as long-term solution [15]. For the short term, it implements new measures to minimize bias in procedures such as recruitment or promotion. The long term, however, is seen as a project of transformation for an organization. This approach acknowledges the existence of power systems and seeks to challenge the existing hegemony through implementation of equality values. An example of transformational change is aging management; younger employees are seen as more innovative and flexible, while older employees are associated with higher costs of salary, benefits, and health care needs. Therefore, organizations may prefer young workers to older staff. The application of the transformational change concept as an immediate intervention provides need relief, which is why a long-term cultural shift occurs [16]. Therefore, for the short term, an organization can set up legislation preventing discrimination based on age. However, for the long-term solution, negative stereotypes of older employees need to be replaced with the positive realization that younger employees can add value to the workplace through innovation and flexibility that comes with youth. Through transformation change, the short-term solution affords the organization the time necessary to enact deep-rooted culture changes leading to a more inclusive environment.

Benefits of Workplace Diversity Management

Workplace diversity management is beneficial to the organization and its members. Effective workplace diversity management brings substantial potential benefits such as better decision-making and improved problem-solving, greater creativity and innovation, which leads to enhanced product development and more successful marketing of two different types of customers (Cox [13]). Diversity management provides the organization with the ability to compete in global markets. Also, simply recognizing diversity allows employees with talents to feel needed and have a sense of belonging, which in turn increases their commitment to the organization and allows each of them to contribute to the success of the organization in a unique way. Similarly, Kreitz (2008, cited in [1]) affirms that "the advantages of workplace diversity management include increased productivity, increase creativity and problem solving, attracting and retaining talent, help to build communication in teams and it increases market share and number of diverse customers" [1, p. 31]. In addition, Downey, Van Der-Werff, Thomas, and Plant [17] note that the benefits of workplace diversity management in recent time include increase in creativity and productivity, new attributes, new language skills, global understanding, new processes and new solutions to difficult problems, greater ability, better markets insight, stronger customer and community loyalty, innovation, and improved recruitment and retention. To Preeti, Poonam, and Ekanshi [1], the benefits of workplace diversity management include high level of productivity, exchange of varieties of ideas and teamwork, learning and growth, effective communication, and diverse experience.

Challenges of Workplace Diversity Management

One of the greatest challenges that an organization faces when trying to adopt a more inclusive environment is assimilation for any member outside of the dominant group. Simons and Vazquez [18] studied the interplay between power, ideology, and discursive acts which serve to reinforce the hegemonic structure of an organization. In fact, everything (organizational symbols, rituals, and stories) serves to maintain the position of power held by the dominant group. Extending this concept to diversity inclusion where organizations seek to hire or promote individuals that are not part of this dominant group into management positions, a difficult tension develops between the socially constructed organizational norm and the acceptance of cultural diversity. Often times, these individuals are mentored and coached to adopt the necessary traits for inclusion into the privileged group as opposed to being embraced for their differences. Such assimilated people are often denied the opportunities to be themselves. This may eventually decrease organizational performance.

Another challenge faced by organizations striving to foster a more diverse workforce is the management of a diverse population. Managing diversity is more than simply acknowledging differences in people. Sharma [9] contends that workforce that is highly diverse can be difficult to motivate and manage for a variety of reasons. A major challenge is miscommunication within an organization. There are competencies, however, which help to develop effective communication in diverse organizational environments. These skills include self-monitoring, empathy, and strategic decision-making. Self-monitoring refers to a communication awareness of one's behavior and how it affects another person along with one's willingness to modify this behavior based on knowledge of its impact. Strategic decision-making implies that communication sources and channels used to reach organization members as well as substances of messages conveyed are mindfully selected. However, each individual interprets messages differently and discerns meaning based on their unique standpoint and without a willingness to accept a differing standpoint, and an environment is created where marginalized groups have no voice.

Maintaining a culture which supports the idea of employee voice especially for marginalized group members is yet another challenge that a diverse organization faces in recent times. When the organizational environment is not supportive of dissenting viewpoints, employees may choose to remain silent for fear of repercussions or they may seek alternative safe avenues to express their concerns and frustrations such as online forums and affinity group meetings. By finding opportunities such as these to express dissent, individuals can begin to gather collective support and generate collective sense-making which create a voice for marginalized group members so that they can have a collective strength to trigger changes [19].

Theoretical Framework

While there are several theories which might prove appropriate for a discourse of this nature, the standpoint theory presents us with a heuristic tool for interrogating the central issue of the study. This theory reinforces the point that a marginalized group brings a different perspective to an organization that challenges the status quo since their socially constructed worldview will differ from that of the dominant group. Although the standpoint of the dominant group will often carry more weight, a transformational leader will encourage conflicting standpoints to coexist within an organization which will create a forum for a sanctioned conflict to ensue [20]. From the foregoing, the standpoint theory can be summarized to mean a set of theoretical and epistemological propositions designed to produce alternative knowledge. Such alternative is necessary because it destabilizes dominant andocentric knowledge production that excludes unprivileged groups. Thus, the standpoint theory's most important concept is that an individual's own perspectives are shaped by his/her social and political experiences. A group's experiences create a general and permanent perspective of an immense situation but without personal experiences one's standpoint cannot become truly comprehensible.

Conflict stems from challenging the way things have always been done, and/or ideas and problems that have not been explored from multiple perspectives. The standpoint theory gives a voice to those in a position to see the pattern of behavior that those immersed in the culture have difficulty acknowledging. These unique and varying standpoints help to eradicate groupthink which can develop within a homogeneous group. Mathematical modeling research of teamwork by Page [21] reflects this view. His models demonstrate that heterogeneous teams consistently out-performed homogeneous teams on a variety of tasks. He points out, however, that diversity in teamwork is not always simple and that there are many challenges to fostering an inclusive environment in the workplace for diversity, and thought, and ideas. In the final analysis, the relevance of the standpoint theory to this paper is based on its ability to justify how conflicting standpoints co-exist within an organization which further creates a forum for sanctioned conflicts to ensue and help to eradicate groupthink which often develops within a homogeneous group.

The Role of Leadership in Workplace Diversity Management

A study of success in a multicultural organization can be understood by applying theories of leadership which have evolved over time. Among these theories are trait, transformational, and discursive leadership. The trait leadership theory suggests that leadership is dependent on physical and social attributes of the individual. The Great Man Theory of leadership was popular in the 19th century. In supporting the trait leadership theory, the myth of the Great Man Theory was that some famous world leaders such as Julius Caesar, Mahatman Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln, and Alexander the Great were born leaders, and not made.

This theory is largely related to the personality dimension which is core to diversity. Other leadership theorists posit that leaders are made and not born, and may therefore come from diverse origin [22]. This supports the assertion of Kotter [19] who posits that successful organizations seek out people with leadership potential and then expose them to developmental experiences to bring out their potential.

Eisenberg, Goodall, and Trethewey [22] explain that transformational and discursive leadership are very relevant to multicultural organizations. Transformational leadership focuses on making changes using available human resources. Discursive leadership focuses on a leader's ability to shape communication within an organization to achieve results. Thus, effective communication cannot be achieved without a thorough knowledge and understanding of the cultural values, languages, perception, and other relevant bio-data of employees. This agrees with the definition of diversity by Wakk [23], as negotiating interaction across culturally diverse groups and contriving to get along in an environment characterized by cultural diversity. Therefore, transformational and discursive leadership approaches create an organizational culture that allows and encourages managers and top management to use diversity as an influential resource in organizational effectiveness. In addition, styles of leadership that deal with power and authority are autocratic, democratic, and laissez-fair. These styles focus on the distribution and sharing of power between the managers and the subordinates. Managers also use the situational style of Hersey and Blanch [24] in managing diverse employees. These styles are exhibited based on their own experiences, personality, and education among others.

According to Kreitz [25], successful management of diversity needs the HR professionals to have skills in organizational development, communication, psychology, assessment, and leadership. The main role of leadership in workplace diversity management is to develop a strategic plan that illustrates the organization's philosophy on diversity [9]. Also, Shen, Chanda, D'Netto, and Monga [26] affirm that the leader's job is to encourage and help their organizations to incorporate diverse perspectives which facilitate creative collaboration. Creativity is the heart of the business, and has to be managed by the organizational leader because ignoring diversity issues by leadership "costs money, time and efficiency. Some of the consequences can include unhealthy tensions, loss of productivity as a result of increased conflict, inability to attract and retain talented people of all kinds, complaints and legal actions, inability to retain valuable employees resulting in loss investments in recruitment and training and discrimination" [1].

Conclusion

Diversity is an ever present phenomenon in an organization. Due to globalization, the majority of organizations are nowadays expanding their businesses abroad to gain a competitive leverage. In conclusion, diversity management skills are required by every organization in order to harness the resources that

employees have brought to an organization. It is the active and conscious development of strategic management processes of accepting and using differences and similarities as means of adding value to an organization. Diversity rests on fairness and equity, but fairness and equity cannot be enforced without the commitment of leadership and all employees to the idea of unity in diversity. Managers need to understand the effects of the external environment such as culture, religion, affiliations among others on the performance of their employees. Thus, workplace diversity management is aimed at fostering and maintaining a positive and conducive environment that ensures respect for individual differences, and leadership plays a crucial role in the implementation of diversity management strategies. However, there are many challenges to workplace diversity management, one of these is that work teams which are highly diverse can be difficult to motivate and manage for a variety of reasons, but diversity management is not without benefits. Some of these are that it brings better decision-making and improved problem solving, greater creativity and innovation which can enhance and improve service delivery.

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