



Management and Performance Associates – July 2010

“I’m not crazy, I’m just not you”

Many years ago, as we were getting certified to apply MBTI instruments, we were asked to read the above book by Roger Pearman. Great title, but difficult to apply in real life situations unless we learn to become aware of the differences and learn how to bridge them.

In most western cultures, managers and employees alike have learned how to deal with diversity, if only to avoid being sued for millions of dollars. The situation can be very different in other parts of the world, due to local cultural or religious characteristics. Also, every global company has policies in order to prevent discrimination. As a consequence, they have hired gays and lesbians, ethnically and racially diverse personnel, Jews, Muslims and Atheists, the Millennials are just becoming part of the workforce, but the million dollar question is still: Now what do we do with these people who act, think and operate very differently from us?

In the USA, roughly 50% of the workforce is made-up of women. According to the Department of Labor, the top 5 positions for women are: secretary, nurse, teacher, cashier and health aide. No surprise there, as those professions have traditionally been associated with women, but what about corporate life? How well are women doing in management and leadership positions, where they have to make executive decisions and lead staff? Not so well, as only 2% of the CEO positions among Fortune 500 companies are occupied by women.

Over the last twelve months we have had hundreds of private coaching sessions with senior executives in a large global accounting firm. Most of the women partners still say that they are expected to “behave as men.” What exactly does that mean? How can we hire a woman but then disregard her opinions as “too feminine?” How can we hire Millennials and then expect that they do not communicate via text? We all have biases, and we may end up hiring someone openly gay and then expecting him or her to behave “straight,” or a black person to behave “white.” In other words, we

are dealing well with diversity (quantity), but not so well with inclusiveness (quality), as most managers still have the expectation that everybody in the workforce will behave in the same “approved” way. Bluntly, we are still cloning corporate types, not only with the same dark suit and red tie, but also with expected behaviors. It's time to change in order to take advantage of all this diversity that the world is providing us, instead of throwing it out the window.

In order to be respectful toward everyone, offices became gender neutral and color blind. Inclusiveness presents a new paradigm: Become aware of the differences that people bring to the table, and include them because of their differences, not in spite of them. Regardless of gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, socioeconomic or academic background, people will continue to act, think, communicate and make decisions differently. Managers need to take advantage of different approaches and thinking processes in order to achieve innovation, a fundamental survival competency during these tough economic times.

Finally, forget all the visible differences. Even if we still look the same, we may think differently. That’s what we call “diversity among equals.”

“Why great leaders don’t take yes for an answer”, by Michael Roberto, is another great book that says it all. Leaders, more often than not, only hear yes from their direct reports. People are afraid of telling bad news, they embellish accomplishments and minimize risks. Managers are too much alike. Executives are left in the dark, if they do not learn how to balance two key competencies: fostering conflict and dissent and forging consensus.

Mr. Roberto lists a large number of examples in politics (Kennedy with the Bay of Pigs invasion), science (NASA with the disaster of the Columbia) and business (Coca Cola and the 1985 fiasco of changing the formula of its flagship product). All of these examples are a consequence of the same



problem: lack of strategic decision making, managers who were uncomfortable manifesting their dissent, strong leaders unwilling to hear bad news, and a false assumption of unanimity.

Therefore, effective leaders should surround themselves with people that are competent, but different from them. In other words, effective teams complement their leaders, and vice-versa. This complementation is accomplished not only with knowledge and skills, but mostly with different thinking styles, motivations, cultures, opinions and experiences – both in life and careers.

Finally, effective leaders should also be great facilitators and generate consensus and commitment, in order to obtain a synergistic approach. Another great quote that we admire, by Noel Tichy and Dave Ulrich: "CEOs tend to overlook the lesson Moses learned several thousand years ago—namely, getting the Ten Commandments written down and communicated is the easy part; getting them implemented is the challenge."

Moving from concepts to tactics, this is what we recommend:

- 1) Be careful when everyone agrees too fast. It seems like efficient decision making, but most of the time, dissent is not being made clear. Play devil's advocate. Ask "what if" questions. When everybody is already onboard, ask them about the disadvantages of the selected course of action. Ask "what risks are we not looking at right now?"
- 2) Create a climate where everybody feels free to say "I disagree." Make their opinions count. All of them, not only the ones you agree with. Be sure to listen and to demonstrate that you are listening (especially when you disagree with them).
- 3) Learn how to paraphrase. Use phrases like "If I understand you correctly, your proposal deals with"

- 4) Show empathy for different points of view. Say, for example, "You are concerned about your direct reports when you propose"
- 5) Don't fall in love with the first good idea. Keep asking "What else comes to mind"? Chances are that better ideas will surface. Piggybacking on someone else's idea is one of the best advantages of a brainstorming session.
- 6) Remember that staff meetings and brainstorming sessions are dominated by extroverted types, as they elaborate ideas while verbalizing them. Be sure to include the introverted types, who may need additional time to process ideas internally. You may acknowledge the contributions already presented and then invite the quieter groups, saying things like: "We have already heard the opinion from sales and marketing staff. What do the risk and operations personnel recommend?"

We hope we haven't transmitted the wrong ideas to the reader. Working with a diverse team may not be easy. Actually, quite the opposite. It may require lots of patience, skill and a different mindset. The rewards are the outcomes. Diverse teams have the potential to be much more effective.

This month we invited Cheryl Williams, a good friend, consultant, researcher and university professor to share her best practices with our readers. This is what she has to say about the topic:

"Working across cultural dimensions creates opportunities that may not be present when working intra-culturally. It is known that 'success happens when opportunity meets preparation' and being culturally competent in today's workplace and marketplace are necessary components of the preparation process.

Global awareness is the first ingredient in this cultural cocktail, and although required, awareness alone is not enough. For, once a situation is recognized as needing cross cultural interpretations



and responses, knowing what is correct-and-proper in situations leads you to engage in active cultural due diligence. This is the component that often leads individuals into trouble. Trouble disguised as 'common sense'. Too many frantic managers and executives have tried to use 'just common sense' only to find out that there is no such thing when applying this way of thinking across cultures.

Recognizing that 'you don't know what you don't know' should say to all of us, I need to find out! What is going on here? What does this mean? How should I respond? MAPA Consulting is perfectly poised to assist individuals and organizations facing these dilemmas."

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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