

Diversity in the workplace

When you hear HR professionals and top notch recruiters opine about how important it is to have diversity in the workplace and how organizations are embracing diversity, your first reaction is one of happiness. After all, people in a workplace must mirror diversity in society. In the general sense, we all understand diversity to be co-existence of men and women, people from different regions and religions and people from varied social, cultural and economic backgrounds. In the workplace, diversity assumes another dimension. The measure of diversity in the workplace is how, in recruiting, business and HR functions have made deliberate decisions to hire “outsiders”. These are people who may have an education that is traditionally not the norm for a particular role. They may have worked in industries that have nothing in common with the industry where the current role sits. They could even have been in functions that are completely unrelated to the role. It is entirely possible that they could’ve come from an organization whose size is much bigger or smaller than their current organization. And, among other things, they have probably had great exposure to living and working abroad and being exposed to different cultures and economies.

Why do all of these things matter? After all, why should recruiters re-invent the wheel by treading on a path less traveled instead of doing business as usual which is likely to at least yield predictable results? The answer lies in viewing an organization as a dynamic and living creature that will suffocate and stagnate unless it has new things to do and whose great potential can be harnessed only by wisdom of varied thought. Think of how many times you have done different things just to enrich your own self. I know of a lot of established and successful professionals who travel to remote corners of the globe only to experience different landscapes or cuisines or to even live among the locals for a real encounter with an alien culture. I know people who have taken up painting, or pottery or singing because they want to add something new to their otherwise successful but humdrum life. Then there are those who have bid goodbye to their cushy lives and have gone on to teach marginalized kids in remote parts of the country. Why do all these folks do these seemingly unnecessary things? Because they believe that diverse experiences enrich life. In some way, their own lives are unfulfilled without these experiences. Workplaces are no different. Even the United States of America now has a black President whose father was a Kenyan Muslim and mother, a white woman from Kansas!

So what is the real need to be diverse in the workplace? What are the societal and economic ramifications that goad organizations to proudly claim that theirs is a workplace of diversity? Why do companies need to advertise that their policy and philosophy both espouse diversity? The reason is simple. Without thinking too much, you can safely jump to the conclusion that a workplace that is diverse will be less monolithic, hierarchical and steeped in business as usual. A lay person’s version of diversity rests on these assumptions. As a professional, you tend to look at employers espousing diversity more favorably because you assume that they have created a workplace that is open to new and un-conventional ideas and where you will not need to swim upstream to get heard. You assume that an alien accent, a different face, a cultural agnosticism, a religious preference to name a few, will not be deal breakers. Most importantly, you grow as a professional and as a person when you go to work every day in an organization like this. You learn that you will constantly be exposed to new things and ideas through colleagues from far and near. You learn that you can achieve in excess of your targets

by creating interpersonal excellence that you were hitherto possibly unable to do due to your own cultural baggage. Once a colleague from another cultural paradigm shines a light on your own cultural inadequacies, you may quickly unlearn your impediments and learn a new way to treat people. You may learn to accept and even appreciate the opposite gender by learning how gender crosspollination at work helps people become better managers, spouses or parents. Most importantly, you learn how to be accepting of ideas and tolerant of people. This is the greatest take away from diversity in a workplace. As someone involved in the business of helping organizations manage their learning needs, I am asked often to create training programs for management excellence. These programs deal with the usual needs such as communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork, personal effectiveness, to name a few. The one constant need of 'thinking outside the box' though, is omnipresent. Every client wants to propel their business to success by making their employees think about different ways and things that lead to success.

How can you think differently if you don't know how to? After all, you've learnt how to count and spell by going to school. You learn about fashion by observing fashionable people. You learn about politics by reading the newspaper and so on. So, you'd be at a loss to do and think differently unless you've been in an environment that incubates such ideas. You would have had to spend time interacting with people of different and disparate views and sensibilities in order to think outside your own box. Hence, the beauty that is the diverse workplace! It makes better business sense and better personal sense too! Unfortunately, the truth is quite different. HR function in organizations is steeped in its own morass. More often than not, it becomes limited to Diwali and Christmas parties or a "bring your kid to work" day or as in the case of one of my ex-employers, Karva Chauth parties! If HR has been asked to procure someone who is an MBA from a top B School with 5 years of experience in operations in FMCG, they will stick to the script no matter what. If a brilliant and potentially high performing candidate arrives at their door fitting all criteria except being from FMCG, he or she can expect a closed mind. I was once asked how I could be pushed for a top job in sales in a diversified group when my sales background was in Apparel and Fashion. My answer was that it is the skill set that should be looked at and not necessarily the industry. No human being is so stupid that he or she cannot learn the intricacies of a new industry or organization. The expectation is just to get a chance to excel. Sadly many organizations will turn away excellence from their offices because it does not come wearing clothes of their choice! This is a death knell for business and especially for business in India. At every HR forum you get to hear that talent is in such shortage. Are employers willing to give un-conventional talent a chance?

