

Smart diversity management

THERE IS MORE TO DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT THAN MEETS THE EYE.

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(d) Definitions of managing diversity are generally fairly narrow. The general consensus, however, is that managing diversity has to do with managing people who have cultural, generational, gender and political differences.

Admittedly, this can be very challenging, particularly in a country such as South Africa, where the Constitution recognises eleven official languages and at least an additional fifteen languages, but arguably even more so in Dubai, where 90% of the population are foreigners.

Generally accepted definitions of diversity management omit two critical

dimensions: they fail to recognise that in addition to cultural, generational, gender and political differences, diversity management also entails managing employees with different personality profiles and different work styles. These to aspects add a lot of diversity to the mix.

While personality types typically include the mother hen, the joker, the dude, the cheer leader, the realist, the link, the geek and the innovator, work styles include producers, empathisers, visionaries, implementers, planners, movers, controllers, independents, organisers, adapters, innovators and traditionalists.

Each of these different personality types and work styles brings something unique into the workplace. As American author and humourist, Mark Twain observed: "It were not best that we should all think alike; it is the difference of opinion that makes horse races."

Leaders need to ensure that they have a broad spectrum of personality types and work styles in their teams. Different personality types and work styles have different strengths. When combined optimally, there is alchemy: visions are crafted, and innovations devised. These, however, would come to nought without team players, with the "other" requisite work styles, who are able to ensure that visions are implemented, and innovations introduced.

Age is another very important aspect that is often overlooked in diversity management. Traditionally, leaders have always been perceived as mature individuals, over the age of forty. The world of work has changed, dramatically. Leaders need to guard against ageism. They need to ensure

that there is no stereotyping and no discrimination on the basis of age. They also need to ensure that their leadership lens includes young leaders. This will enable them to keep in touch with the "troops on the ground".

Recognising that individuals within their team have different needs, leaders need to be able to adapt their leadership style accordingly. Individual team members, however, should always be encouraged to follow their natural work style. This is not always the case. Team members often feel compelled to adopt a work style that they believe would be more acceptable to their employer.

Leaders need to be able to "see the big picture". They need to understand how individuals fit into the "big picture". It is not imperative, however, that individuals understand "the big picture," it is sufficient that they understand their role and their contribution.

Managing during the current economic downturn, one is reminded of the immortal words of English novelist, Charles Dickens, from "A Tale of Two Cities": "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times".

The focus currently is on business survival and on the bottom line. In this environment, there is a real danger of viewing diversity management as "a nice to have", rather than a business imperative.

One should never lose sight of the fact that great leaders know how their people, they know exactly how each individual fits into their corporate jigsaw puzzle, and they know how to maximize diversity optimally. By ensuring the optimal fit, they are able to achieve fantastic results, even when times are tough. *(HRf)*