Chapter 5

Workforce Diversity at the Lagos Business School, Pan-African University, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Diversity is an indisputable element of human life. In their bid to create value, employers have to face the challenges posed by putting together people coming from different backgrounds and with different paradigms. The Lagos Business School has also experienced this phenomenon.

The School has a fair distribution of people from different ethnic groups. It also has a mission that identifies expressly with the Christian view of human nature and yet is open to people of all religious inclinations. As an academic environment, there is also the inevitable risk of distance between academic staff and administrative staff and between lecturers and students. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the positive practices at the LBS that help them leverage workforce diversity and to make a few suggestions for improvement. This chapter will also highlight how the school reflects the importance of leveraging diversity in its academic curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a given phenomenon of human existence. It can be viewed as an enabler or as an inhibitor in the workplace. Individuals in groups, because of their diversity, bring different experiences, knowledge, and information to the table when they come together, and also provide different validation sources and mechanisms for the information they bring (Phillips, Northcraft, & Neale, 2006). In this way, they enrich the organization and are potentially able to create great synergies. Numerous studies have shown, however, that diversity can lead to innovation and enrichment if it is understood, embraced and properly managed. This chapter discusses how the leveraging of workforce diversity is practiced and promoted in the Lagos Business School, a tertiary

institution in Nigeria. In this chapter, the Lagos Business School will be interchangeably referred to as the School.

The chapter will: 1) define diversity and explain the importance of and the ways of leveraging diversity in the workplace; 2) present a case-study of the efforts to leverage diversity in a business school in Nigeria; and 3) draw conclusions and offer suggestions to management practitioners that are interested in leveraging the diversity of their workforce.

Varying Definitions of Diversity

Moran, Harris, and Moran (2001) describe human diversity as comprising "differences of colour, ethnic origin, gender, sexual or religious preferences, age and disabilities" (p. 181). On the same page, quoting the American Express Financial Advisors, they include among diversity characteristics in organizations the following:

"race, gender, age, physical ability, physical appearance, nationality, cultural heritage, personal background, functional experience, position in the organization, mental, and physical challenges, family responsibilities, sexual orientation, military experience, educational background, style differences, economic status, thinking patterns, political backgrounds, city/state/region of residence, IQ level, smoking preference, weight, marital status, non-traditional job, religion, white collar, language, blue collar, and height" (p. 181).

These descriptions of diversity and its defining characteristics tend to show that all forms of human differences are elements of diversity. Each human being is unique and therefore may be motivated differently than others who seem to be in the same situation but may be of a different religion, age, functional expertise, family history and responsibilities, etc. it would be extremely difficult to find two human beings that are exactly alike, without any diversifying element. Even a

set of identical twins could easily diverge in the experiences they live through, in the religion they embrace, or in their level of IQ or EQ. These differences mean that managers cannot take a one-size-fits-all in their approach to the people who work for or with them in their organizations, the people who make up their workforce. What motivates one person may not motivate another at all, and what makes one person less productive may actually raise the level of effectiveness of another person. If a manager were to be blind to the differences between the people who work with him, at best he might treat them all as he would expect himself to be treated. Since not everyone is like him, some people could feel offended or discriminated or insulted by his approach. He could easily end up allowing some friction to build up which might inhibit them from giving their best to their work, and thus some of the organization's goals may be frustrated or at least approached in a sub-optimal way. In today's globalized and competitive environment, it is doubtful that an organization can afford to maintain a workforce that is not performing optimally and constantly innovating to ensure product or service excellence and keep up with the competition.

According to DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy (2007), "workforce diversity refers to the composition of work units in terms of the cultural or demographic characteristics that are salient and symbolically meaningful in the relationships among group members" (p. 474). Such characteristics could include race (Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner, 2002; Moran, Harris & Moran, 2001), ethnicity (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996), gender (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2004; Moran, Harris & Moran, 2001), religion (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), education (Halaby, 2003), age (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2001; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989), type of academic and/or work experience (Cunningham & Chelladurai, 2005), and tenure or length of service (Reagans & Zuckerman, 2001). All these differences among the people can lead to internal divisions and affect

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