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MANAGING A MULTICULTURAL WORK FORCE: HOW PR PRACTITIONERS HELP CORPORATIONS IMPROVE EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

By Daradirek Ekachai

Cultural diversity is emerging as one of the most serious and sensitive issues corporate managers and employers must face and respond to. The increasing diversity, taking into account race, ethnicity, disabilities, gender, and age, will pose new challenges to organization managers who may find themselves unequipped or unprepared to deal with a multicultural work force. At the 1991 Public Relations Society of America's national convention, public relations professionals were called upon to help organizations prepare for the culturally diverse work force (Fry, 1992). Their roles may include advising corporate managers on diversity issues and promoting cross-cultural awareness among various groups in the organization.

This article discusses the existence and importance of cultural diversity in organizations and how public relations practitioners can help management adjust to and benefit from a multicultural work force. This article also suggests the implementation of cross-cultural training programs in multicultural companies and the effects or impact such programs have upon the organizations in the area of employee relations.

America's Changing Demographics

In the 21st century, minority groups in the United States will outnumber the white Americans for the first time (Henry, 1990). Although, at present, three-fourths of U.S. America's 248.7 million people are of European descent, the nation is becoming increasingly multicultural because of the increasing immigration and high birth rates among non-European groups.

The 1990 census reported that minority groups outgrew the white population 1.5 to six times over the last decade. Hispanics and Asians are U.S. America's rapidly growing minority. While the Asian/Pacific Islander population grew faster than any other group (from 3.5 million in 1980 to 7.3 million in 1990), people of Hispanic origin have added 7.7 million to their present total population of 22.3 million (Population Today, January, July/August, 1991). Immigration accounts for much of the minority growth. And with the new immigration law taking effect in 1992, it is projected that more

immigrants will enter the country. If these trends continue, by 2056, the average U.S. resident will trace his or her descent anywhere but white Europe (Henry, 1990). Over the next two decades, Hispanics will account for 47 percent of the U.S. population, blacks 22 percent, Asians and other people of color 18 percent, while whites will account for only 13 percent (cited in Loden and Rosener, 1991).

The changing demographics making up the United States, if not already in some parts of the country, will soon reflect in the nation's labor force, among others. In its Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century, the Hudson Institute reported that throughout the 1990s, minorities, white women, and immigrants will account for 85 percent of the nation's labor force. By the year 2010, white men will account for less than 40 percent of the U.S. American workforce and 75 percent of the new workers will be women and minorities. Moreover, today's U.S. American work force is getting older. Employees in the 35-54 age group will increase from 38 percent in 1985 to 51 percent of the work force by the year 2000 (Johnston and Packer, 1987). These rapid shifts of work force composition cannot be ignored. In fact, they underscore the important role the diversity will play in the organization's success in the future.

Defining Diversity

Although we often start with issues of race and sex when we discuss diversity, diversity is an extremely broad term that refers to all sorts of differences. Some are obviously visible like gender or race; others can usually be concealed. Besides gender or race, Geber (1990) saw diversity as:

the umbrella term that encompasses such employees as single parents, gays, religious fundamentalists, the disabled and older workers. It also can refer to work styles or functions within the company. Salespeople, for instance, will sometimes stereotype accountants as dull, humorless drones. And accountants are just as likely to think of salespeople as fast-talking, sleazy glad handlers.

Managing Diversity

Managing diversity should not be equated with civil rights or women's rights or affirmative action. With this misunderstanding, many organizations have been hesitant to put any efforts in developing a diversity program because they do not want the program to look like a preferential treatment for women and minorities. In fact, companies began to focus on diversity management for pragmatic eco-

conomic reasons. Large corporations started to recognize the top heavy presence of white males in the organization hierarchy, a large clump of women and minority at the bottom, and a record of poor retention of women and minority employees.

According to Geber (1990), minorities and women are likely to move to "smaller, more welcoming companies." Furthermore, because nonwhites, women, and immigrants will heavily make up the labor force in the future, companies must deal with diversity issues. As Xerox Corp. President David Kerns pointed out:

It is absolutely clear that we have to manage diversity right now and much more in the future. American businesses will not be able to survive if we do not have a large diverse work force, because those are the demographics—no choice! The company that gets out in front of managing diversity, in my opinion, will have a competitive edge. (cited in Copeland, 1988)

What is managing diversity? According to Geber (1990), "the philosophy of managing diversity suggests that organizations make whatever changes necessary in their systems, structures and management practices to eliminate any subtle barriers that might keep people from reaching their full potential."

Geber further noted that, while valuing diversity emphasizes cognitive (knowledge and attitude) change, managing diversity focuses on behavioral change. Through training sessions, feedback, performance appraisals and rewards, diversity can be successfully managed.

Given the increasing importance of cultural diversity in today's American work place, few employers or managers are, however, prepared to face it (Copeland, 1988). Most management theories assume the dominant white male employees. Some management strategies overlook cultural differences and may be counterproductive when applied to employees with different cultural backgrounds. Further, a study conducted by Towers Perrin and the Hudson Institute found that 55 percent of the companies surveyed questioned their supervisors' abilities to motivate a diverse workforce, and 40 percent were afraid that different cultural values and background would create difficulties in the organization (cited in Training & Development, November, 1991, p. 11)

While many American organizations are concerned about the challenge of the changing workforce and have begun to offer programs addressing the issue of diversity, the field of managing diversi-

ty is still in its infancy. A recent study found that of the 290 senior human resource professionals surveyed, 20 percent said their organizations have extensive diversity programs, 46 percent said they have some programs and 34 percent indicated they have few or none (Van Eron, 1992).

Implications for PR Practitioners

Public relations managers who want to compete in global and multicultural environments must learn to manage cultural diversity. Managing cultural diversity will enable the managers to overcome cultural barriers such as language, ethnic background, age, gender, religion, and national origin, and to establish effective communication with their diverse publics, especially employees.

This will take a whole new management approach and that will not take place overnight. The new multiracial, multilingual and multinational work force poses a new management challenge to U.S. American managers and a cross-cultural communication challenge to public relations practitioners. New management styles as well as communication skills are needed. Public relations practitioners can play a crucial role in helping management adjust to and benefit from the culturally diverse workforce. They should influence corporation executives to develop a different management approach that capitalizes on the richness the diversity brings. As Fry (1992) stated:

To capitalize on the new mix of workers, corporate managers must understand the beliefs, attitudes and talent of various backgrounds and create systems that allow people of different cultures to work together to fulfill the organization's objectives. (p.12)

To tap the potential of the diversified work force, Fry (1992) suggested that public relations practitioners should be in the forefront on diversity issues by "advising management, helping create strategies to develop greater diversity, communicating with a culturally diverse workforce, and fostering understanding among various worker groups." Public relations persons must convince corporate management that diversified employees are assets of the organization, that a diverse workforce is related to organizational productivity and, more importantly, the adaptation to the culturally diverse workforce is necessary to the organization's survival.

Role of PR in Improving Employees Relations

Bridging the gap between employees and corporate management

has become a critical goal for organizations today. Increasing domestic and global competitions have made the '90s the decade of the employees (Smith, 1990). Public relations practitioners must give internal publics as equal importance as external publics because organizations must depend on them in improving quality, performance and overall competitiveness.

The demographic and cultural changes among employees are a real challenge for public relations persons. The increasing diversity is changing traditional ways of communicating. Since new workers bring with them different values, attitudes, skills and languages, new communication plans, strategies, and activities must be developed to tailor to the needs of different cultural groups in the organization. For example, internal communication messages must be simple, clear, culturally sensitive and free from racial, gender and age biases. If necessary, company policies, rules, job instructions, and other work related messages should be translated for foreign-born employees to avoid any misunderstandings because of language barriers. Providing information in the language that non-English-speaking employees can understand should certainly create goodwill among them toward the company.

In addition to advising management to recognize and understand cultural diversity in the work place, public relations practitioners have to help minority and women workers adjust to corporate life and help each cultural group to be heard. New immigrant workers may not be fluent in English or may lack the knowledge and confidence in the new working environment. Public relations professionals must help them adjust to the mainstream and create or enhance their self-esteem by assuring them they can contribute to the organization. Therefore, programs designed to alleviate problems faced by multicultural employees should be developed. For instance, organizations may need to provide training for new workers who need basic skills or language training. Companies with large Spanish-speaking employees, for example, need to provide a program (e.g., English lessons) that helps them adjust to the English-speaking environment. Also, activities aimed at fostering or maximizing positive interaction among different cultural groups should be implemented.

It is not easy to manage a group of people who have different ideas, perceptions and needs. Prejudice and cultural misunderstandings can cause conflict, which may lead to poor job performance and low productivity. Through understanding, tolerance, and appreciation for cultural differences in the work place, internal conflicts should be reduced and communication barriers eliminated. Employees of different backgrounds will likely be motivated, creative and competitive.

Using the full energy and potential of every employee's talent, point of view and unique background, companies will be able to achieve their common goals and objectives and, hence, improve their competitive edge in today's global environment.

Need for Diversity Training

Cross-cultural or diversity training plays a pivotal role in helping both corporate management and employees overcome cultural barriers and develop the "synergy" of diversity of the work force. It is essential that public relations practitioners include cross-cultural training as one of their foremost public relations activities.

Public relations practitioners should be trained in cross-cultural communication to effectively communicate with culturally diverse audiences. Unfortunately, many U.S. schools of journalism and mass communication neither require nor offer a course in multicultural communication, although they agree that a course in cultural diversity and awareness was somewhat important. (Miller and Foxworth, 1991, cited in Miller, 1991). Thus, it is imperative that public relations practitioners receive cross-cultural, diversity training before preparing and advising organizations for the diverse work force. Public relations practitioners must be equipped to understand the direct impact and subtle nuances of cultural differences. As Miller (1991) stated, "Well-trained, culturally sensitive communicators will be extremely valuable to organizations in the next decade."

Furthermore, diversity training programs can play an important role in reducing cross-cultural communication difficulty, misunderstandings, prejudice, and ethnocentrism among culturally diverse employees. Diversity training would try to get diversified employees to appreciate individual and cultural differences and work better together. Public relations practitioners need to develop and offer such training programs for everybody at every level in the organization, from management executives to rank and file staffs.

Organizations like The Peace Corps and some multinational corporations have extensively used training programs to prepare their staff members for life abroad and cross-cultural interaction. Many programs and materials have been developed to prepare Caucasian Americans for interaction in another country or, within the United States, for interaction with African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans and other ethnic groups (Brislin et al., 1986). Public relations practitioners can apply the existing cross-cultural training materials for the company's internal communication training programs.

Cross-cultural researchers and practitioners have identified five

basic types of cross-cultural training programs: cognitive training, behavior modification, experiential training, cultural self-awareness, and attribution training. More information on the various approaches to cross-cultural training can be found in Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) and Brislin, Landis and Brandt (1983).

To guide the development of diversity training program in an organization, the following objectives are recommended:

1. Introduce trainees to the concepts and issues regarding cultural diversity, knowledge about culture and skills.
2. Increase trainees' understanding of diverse cultures and the impacts on interpersonal communication and relationships among culturally diverse work force.
3. Identify potential barriers and problematic issues resulting from cultural differences such as concepts of work, time, personal space.
4. Develop intercultural communication skills that will enable trainees to effectively work in a multicultural environment.

One caution. Corporate diversity training must be carefully handled and implemented because, if conducted heedlessly, it could backfire. In 1991, Lucky Store, Inc., a west coast supermarket chain, was sued for discrimination resulting from comments made during a diversity training session (Training & Development, November, 1991, p. 11). The plaintiffs took certain comments the trainer used as examples of stereotypes (e.g., "women cry more") as discriminatory. But Lucky argued that the attendants took the comments out of context.

Conclusion

Given the continuing trend of a changing demographics of U.S. population, it is not surprising that diversity is a hot topic these days. The 1990 U.S. census report may have increased concentration among U.S. American companies on their efforts to learn how to manage a diverse workforce. Public relations personnel who can work with a diverse work force will be in great demand in the future. As communication specialists, public relations practitioners must be knowledgeable in cultural diversity issues and equipped with cross-cultural communication skills in order to effectively communicate with the organization's diverse publics.

In addition, while white practitioners, through cross-cultural training, can learn to be sensitive to cultural differences or to understand the direct impact and subtle nuances of cultural differences, minority public relations practitioners, who are less likely to be found in American businesses, can also play a large role in helping their

companies deal with diversity. This calls for more aggressive recruitment and training of minority public relations practitioners.

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