

# Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

## MANAGING DIVERSITY--VALUES AND ATTITUDES: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN AWARENESS

David Efraty, University of Houston--Downtown  
William E. Stratton, Idaho State University

### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a short experiential exercise for imparting an appreciation of the differences in perceptions, values, and attitudes inherent in the diverse work force that is fast becoming a reality in most work organizations.

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The 1990's have been described as "a decade where organizations will have to learn to manage diversity" (Robbins, p.632). As a perhaps extreme example, the 350 employees in one Digital Electronics Corporation plant in Boston include people from 44 countries speaking 19 different languages. Plant announcements in this firm are routinely issued in English, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese and Haitian Creole (Wagner & Hollenbeck, p.302).

Increasing diversity results from a number of ongoing changes in society that are significantly altering the nature of the work force and consequently making the management of diversity a major issue (Dreyfus, p.12). The predominance of white males in the work force is coming to an end as the participation of women and minorities increases rapidly. By the year 2000 only 15 percent of new entrants to the U.S. labor force will consist of native white males (Wagner & Hollenbeck, p.302).

Dual-career couples are becoming much more common. Many new entrants to the work force have attained higher educational levels than ever before, while at the same time a significant number of others cannot perform basic reading, writing, and computational tasks. As the baby boom generation approaches retirement they are being replaced by fewer new entrants to the work force, thus increasing competition for skilled workers. Each succeeding generation of workers, raised under different circumstances and feeling its own pressures, brings additional differing values and attitudes into the work setting. Meanwhile, the globalization of business introduces yet other diverse elements into enterprises operating on a multinational basis. All of these trends will continue for the foreseeable future, and all pose new problems for managers in organizations.

Organizations are already beginning to adapt to these new realities. Some have instituted remedial programs to raise employee skills to acceptable levels in reading and mathematics. Many companies engage in special recruiting efforts and adopt more flexible work arrangements to attract women and minorities. Diversity training is instituted to increase sensitivity to cultural differences. Some organizations have created positions such as "Vice President for Diversity" or "Diversity Manager" in recognition of the importance of dealing with this issue.

### TEACHING MANAGEMENT OF DIVERSITY

A fundamental issue introduced into all organizations, as they become more diverse is how to deal with the resulting value and attitude differences. This is of major concern in the education of future managers as reflected in increased attention given to the impact of diversity in business school curricula.

In organizational behavior courses this concern is often focused on the impact diverse values and attitudes have within the firm. One of our educational challenges is to impart an appreciation for and

sensitivity toward these differences. Since most individuals tend to take their own values and attitudes for granted, they are not aware of the often subtle effects resulting from their assumptions and the impact they have on others, particularly others who are different. It is essential as instructors that we transfer a clear understanding of these concepts to students who will manage organizations that embody diverse values and attitudes.

We have found a classroom exercise that is particularly useful in helping students appreciate the impact of these differences by really impressing upon them the impacts diverse values and attitudes have on the ability of people to understand each other and work together. This exercise, used in our undergraduate courses in organization behavior, consists of a group experiential exercise that can be conducted in about 75 minutes and which can be followed by a lecture and discussion of values and attitudes also taking about 75 minutes.

We use this exercise in our introductory course in organizational behavior. It is short enough to be conducted in a single class session and relates very directly to lecture material on human resource management issues raised by diversity, to which many textbooks have not yet responded vary adequately. This exercise allows students to actually experience some of the phenomena that lectures and assigned readings typically discuss.

### DETAILED DISCUSSION OF THE EXERCISE

The exercise used is "The Alligator River Story" by Uma Sekaran and W.C. Coscarelli (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, p. 29-30). The objective of this exercise is to help students realize the different perceptions, values, and attitudes that individuals possess regarding common everyday occurrences. This exercise presents the student with a brief, two-paragraph story involving five characters:

1. Abigail, who is in love with Gregory and is ready to pay any price to see him.
2. Sinbad, who is a riverboat captain who will not take Abigail across the river unless she consents to go to bed with him.
3. Gregory, who rebuffs Abigail with disdain.
4. Ivan, who is not willing to listen to Abigail's problems.
5. Slug, whose compassion for Abigail makes him seek out Gregory and beat him brutally.

After reading the story students are instructed to individually rank the five characters in order from the one perceived to be most offensive to the one perceived as least objectionable. Thus, the story character who seems most reprehensible to the student is entered first on the list, followed by the second most reprehensible and so on, with the least objectionable character being entered fifth. In addition, students are instructed to briefly note the reasons for each ranking.

Once this first phase of the exercise has been completed, students are assigned to groups of four or more members (to insure some diversity of opinion) and are instructed to carry out the following tasks:

1. Compare how the group members ranked the characters.
2. Examine the reasons used by the group members for their rankings.
3. Seek to reach consensus on a final group ranking together with the reasons used to achieve agreement.

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4. Post the group ranking in a table publicly visible to the entire class. Spokespersons for all groups then explain their group's ranking, followed by a class discussion of differences among the group results.

We have found this exercise useful in achieving a number of goals:

1. It allows students to increase self-awareness of their own values and attitudes by sharing their rankings with others and having to defend them.
2. It helps students realize the diversity of perceptions, values and attitudes even among their peers.
3. It creates some interdependence among students in their respective groups as they try to achieve a consensus group ranking and openly deal with their conflicting perceptions. (In this respect the exercise fosters an awareness of the realities of organizational interdependence.)

To ensure that these goals are realized, the instructor should attend to a number of issues as discussed below.

## Group Heterogeneity

Student groups should be heterogeneous in all possible respects--race, gender, age, etc. The more heterogeneous they are the better. Although this may increase the frustration level in their struggle to achieve group consensus, lack of group heterogeneity might defeat the objectives of the exercise and result in a very brief process in achieving group consensus. This rarely occurs, but if it does take place the instructor should direct the attention of the group to its group dynamics to account for the unexpected results.

## Balanced Group Composition

It is essential to ensure that the groups are balanced. For example, it is preferable to have groups that consist of 50% males and 50% females, or 50% black and 50% white. While this may not always be feasible, it is essential that the instructor be aware that the experience of a sole female in a predominantly male group or a lone black in an otherwise white group might be somewhat devastating. In one class a female dropped the course following her participation in this exercise with three other males in her group. Her rankings were diametrically opposed to theirs and resulted in the inability of the group to reach a consensus.

## Averaging Rankings

The instructor should encourage group members to follow the guidelines for reaching consensus, while recognizing that not every ranking will meet with everyone's approval. They should avoid either simply repeating their own individual preferences or changing their minds only in order to reach agreement or avoid conflict. However, they should feel free to deviate from their original individual rankings if another group member presents an appealing rationale for a different value profile. Conflict-reducing techniques such as majority voting, averaging of rankings, trading, or coin flipping should be discouraged as methods for reaching group consensus.

## Timing

Based on our experience, it is preferable that this exercise not be conducted at the very beginning of the semester. Since the content of the exercise relates to love relationships between Abigail and Gregory and a physical encounter between Abigail and Sinbad, the exercise is experienced "dramatically" by quite a few students and can involve the sharing of some deeply held personal values. It is better if the exercise is used after class members have had some experience with each other, and far enough into the course that they will not become apprehensive that the entire course might be full of exercises focusing on sexual or personal issues.

## REFERENCES

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## BIOGRAPHIES

David Efraty Ph.D. (Case Western Reserve University, 1975)

Dr. Efraty has taught at the Israel Institute of Technology, held faculty positions at Idaho State University and Radford University, and currently is Professor of Organizational Behavior and Management at the University of Houston--Downtown. Dr. Efraty's research interests include the effects of quality of work life and organizational identification on performance, negotiation of the psychological contract as a conflict management tool, and work motivation models. In addition he has published cases for classroom use, performed research regarding the effects of different teaching approaches on student interpersonal, leadership, and conflict resolution styles, and on professional interaction among the various business disciplines.

William E. Stratton, Ph.D. (Case Western Reserve University. 1974)

Dr. Stratton is Professor and Chair of the management department at Idaho State University. His teaching interests center on organizational behavior, theory, and development and change. His research has included work in the areas of inter-organizational cooperation, student learning styles and performance, aggressive employee behavior, ecological theory and organizational development, turnover, moral development and decision making, and international dimensions of organizational behavior. He has also published a number of cases for classroom use and conducted research on the effects of different teaching approaches and on factors affecting student course evaluations.