POWER AND ETHNICITY: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISE
(HOW TO SENSITIZE STUDENTS TO DIVERSITY)

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This paper discusses an experiential learning exercise that can be used to increase student's sensitivity to diversity. More specifically, this paper stresses the importance of providing business students with an opportunity to identify and acknowledge their biases and to grapple with these both privately and through direct interaction with other students.

Background

During the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the attention directed toward valuing and managing diversity training in U.S. organizations. The increased focus on diversity training has been spurred by several reasons that include demographics, which indicate that, by the year 2000, women and minorities will make up 85% of the net increase in the national workforce. In preparation, some organizations offer managing-diversity training to teach managers to work with people different from themselves and to help underutilized employees to adjust to corporate culture. For example, Xerox engages training consultants who specialize in managing-diversity training because affirmative action is already a part of their corporate culture. Other companies provide such training because they recognize that affirmative action is not part of their culture.

Other predictions suggest a workforce shortage which will see an influx of immigrant and handicapped workers in the coming years. Like Xerox, many organizations have begun to acknowledge that learning to communicate flexibly results in personal, professional, and organizational enrichment. This benefit is a first step toward dealing with diversity in the workplace. These same organizations have also recognized that with the sharp increase in international business, there are strong incentives to provide training to its employees on cultural differences. Forward thinking companies like Digital Equipment, AT&T, ComputerLand, and Pepsico are actively promoting training programs that help employees to appreciate working with others who might be different than they are.

Another reason for the increased emphasis on valuing and managing diversity has been the realization by some organizations that women and minorities are often barred from moving up to top management positions or laterally into line positions that traditionally have been held by white males. Thus, they encounter the infamous glass ceiling and wall. One cause of this problem is that the standards of performance are higher for women and minority men than for traditional managers in the same job and responsibility level (Solomon, 1990). Recognized as an innovator in valuing diversity, Corning Inc. is in the forefront of breaking the glass ceiling. The company's Valuing Diversity booklet makes it clear that retention and advancement are as important as hiring nontraditional employees. Its Career and Family booklet details a variety of alternatives for maternity, disability, and dependent care benefits.

In addition, Corning offers two mandatory diversity awareness programs: Women and Men as Colleagues and Valuing Racial Diversity. Honeywell is another company that is focusing on development and the assignments women and minorities are given.

The Exercise: Rationale

While the changing demographics have forced organizations to develop training programs to meet the demands of a more diverse workforce, business schools can provide an early start for its students in learning to value and manage diversity. That is, business schools can use experiential learning exercises (in courses) as a vehicle for helping students to (1) draw on the richness of diversity, (2) work as team members and (3) bring out their best efforts. An underlying theme of such experiential exercises is the emphasis on diversity that stresses the importance of seeing differences as a positive force that should be recognized and nurtured.

Experiential learning exercises on valuing and managing diversity should include not only content, but also processes that expose students to the principles underlying working with different individuals. Such an approach prevents the learning experience from focusing solely on knowledge and information in a way that obscures the acquisition, organization, and application of that information. Thus, any experiential learning exercise should have an experiential or process focus that allows participants, through interaction in small groups, to develop an acceptance of a wide range of differences among people. Such an approach is keeping in line with Gentry's (1990) suggestion that "experiential learning is participative, interactive, and applied."

This paper presents an experiential learning framework used by the authors in increasing students' sensitivity to valuing and managing diversity. More specifically, the paper stresses the importance of providing students with an opportunity to (1) identify and acknowledge their biases and (2) to grapple with these privately and through direct interaction with other students in the class. This systematic approach not only aims at improving students self-awareness in diversity but also focuses on students' understanding of the relative power or lack of power perceived in themselves and in the group(s) with which they identify.

The Exercise: Procedure

The class begins with an overview by the leader. An introduction of all students and is then followed by a discussion (first in small groups and then sharing

with the total class) on their objectives from the exercise. Discussion then turns to developing an agreement on a code of behavior that will (1) guarantee respect for the point of view of each student, (2) encourage the building of trust within the group, and (3) help each student to attain his or her objectives. With the aim of participation from every student, the following questions are then used as a focus for discussion:

1.   What is your ethnic/cultural background?

2.   Where did you grow up, and what other ethnic/cultural groups resided in that community?

3.   How did your family see itself as like or different from other ethnic/cultural groups?

4.   What are your earliest images of color as an ethnic factor?

5.   What are your feelings about your ethnic identity? How might they be influenced by the power relationships between your ethnic group and others (sexual identity can be included as part of this question also)?

The authors' experience has shown that since the list of questions at the beginning demand a degree of reflection from the students, it is helpful if the questions are given to each student before the start of the class. It is important to note that the instructor should carefully answer each of the questions before the class. The instructor's responses can prompt the students as well as provide a model for the students. If co-instructors are used, the prompting and modeling value is particularly powerful.

The Exercise: Power Affiliations

The opportunity to recall early ethnic experiences is intended to put students in touch with feelings and incidents long forgotten though still influential in their perceptions and behavior. This first stage of the process is largely descriptive and intellectual, but perceptions are influenced by thinking and feeling. Thus students are asked to shift their focus from the cognitive to the emotional aspects of ethnicity.

Articulating feelings is more difficult for most people than merely describing incidents. However, it affords students an opportunity to become more comfortable (1) with their own feelings about themselves and others and (2) with the processes of exploring and understanding feelings and attitudes in others. As students discuss their feelings and behaviors, it is suggested that they view their experiences in the context of the power afforded them as ethnic persons. This enables them to see the connection between the relative power of their cultural groups and their own feelings, perceptions, and behavior. Students should come to recognize that each person usually perceives his or her ethnic group in a hierarchical relationship with one group having more power and another less. When these groups relate to one another in work or other situations, their feelings and behavior tend to be complementary and to be influenced by their relative positions of power. For example, the more powerful groups tend to take the initiative and feel competent, whereas the less powerful tend to comply and feel less competent. One might say, 'I always feel

comfortable offering my opinion. Another might say, "I never volunteer, unless asked or even prodded."

During discussions, students are expected to compile a list of such complementary feelings and behaviors. The discussions may focus on the individual as a person of power or nonpower within his or her family and work group. Because power and powerlessness are such common experiences for everyone regardless of background and are thus readily understood in the context of family, these understandings are easily applied to diversity relationships in the work setting. For example, one male student remarked that when he was growing up he never finished a sentence. Either his mother or older sister would complete the thought before he could get the words out. Whether entitled or scapegoat as a member of a family or an ethnic group, the students can come to understand his or her own power and to comprehend it as a major determinant of perceptions, feelings, and behavior.

The experiences, feelings, and behaviors of interacting parties that differ greatly in power can be quite complex and different. This is especially clear in a comparison of the experiences of Caucasian males as the empowered and women and minorities as the underpowered. It is between these groups that the power differential is the greatest in today's organizations. The vast differences in perceptions whereby each party views the other as paranoid become understandable. For example, what most Caucasian males perceive as an orderly organizational system, most women and minorities may experience as unresponsive, unremitting, and well rationalized. The Caucasian male might say, "I spent a lot of time and energy organizing this project with your needs in mind. Why can't you go along with it?"

The process also clarifies the ambivalence and paradoxes that exist for both groups. For example, many women and minorities, in adapting to positions of relative powerlessness, may accommodate to projections of inferiority and incompetence, becoming dependent or passive within the organization. Although this behavior may facilitate adaptation to a condition of powerlessness, it is maladaptive for taking responsibility and initiative and assuming power. In addition, efforts by women and minorities to cope with the powerlessness and to combat it may be viewed by the power group as undesirable. For example, adaptive behavior on the part of women and minorities, such as guardedness or assuming a more assertive stance may be seen by the power group as threatening and rejecting to them. The overpowering individual may wonder, "Why is she giving me the silent treatment; why is she sulking, why is she so 'bitchy'

Examining the power of white males in organizations often raises questions about the significance of sex and race in relation to cultural identity. The instructor should help students understand that it could be theorized that the power derived from white males in powerful organizational positions tends to diminish the need for a strong cultural identity. In addition, it can also be postulated that the lack of power experienced by persons (specifically women and minorities) without organizational privilege reinforces their need for a strong cultural identity and their tendency to relate to other cultural groups in terms of the perceived power of that group. Thus, a white male might say, "I speak for myself." He sees himself as an individual and not a male Caucasian. Whereas, black women may say, "We

need to present the minority point of view to the manager."

The Exercise: Gender Applications

Students can also apply these understandings about power to issues of sexual status. When it is difficult to initiate a discussion of feelings regarding ethnicity or culture, a beginning can be made with a focus on how it feels to be male or female. Discussions during the class exercise may confirm that the feelings and behaviors identified with a white male role in an organization are similar to those of the power group and that the feelings and behaviors identified with a female role are similar to those of the underpowered group. This discussion allows the instructor to interject other relevant organizational variables at this point. For example, Tsui et al (1991) presented significant results about differences in commitment to the organization for whites and non-whites, and males and females. If you are a white, therefore, in a predominately non-white group, or if you are male in a predominately female group, you will show less commitment to the organization. In addition, one possible explanation for this effect is that traditionally males (or whites) have been in gender-(or race-) homogeneous units where there was no opportunity or necessity to adapt to the presence of females (or non-whites) in their work units. The presence of females (or non-whites) appeared to have created psychological discomfort for these males (or whites). In contrast, women (and non-whites) were usually the minority members in most organizational settings. They were used to being different and appeared to have learned to cope with such difference accordingly (Ely, 1991).

The Exercise: Workplace Applications

Students will find that an experiential exercise structured in the manner described here is of practical values in the work setting. The experience of discussing thoughts and feelings about ethnic/culture/sex status offers students a background that helps them to discuss similar questions with each other in a matter-of-fact way when this is appropriate.

The working relationship of employees in today's organizations is in itself a power relationship. The dynamics of power and lack of power are operating. The expertise of employees with power to work with individuals who lack power places both groups in positions of power and lack of power, respectively. Cultural and sexual variables compounds the consequences of this power differential. Students must learn to understand that for the individual who feels that someone with power does not understand them may reinforce the powerlessness experienced in a working relationship. In addition, power issues related to differences in culture, sex, age, and other variables may exaggerate the power inherent in the working relationship in a way that causes the individuals to misperceive each other. With an awareness of the influence of power in complementary relationships, the student is better prepared to understand (what may result) in a counterproductive use of an individual's power or the lack of power.

Valuing diversity is an essential ingredient in working with others in organizations because it neutralizes powerlessness of women, minorities or others and requires an accurate perception of them. To build trust and develop a relationship that will foster a valuing of diversity it is essential that organizations expect its' employees to be receptive and to be responsive to each others uniqueness. That is, all employees must perceive each other accurately and must also understand the differences between each other while resisting any cognitive distortions, such as stereotyping and value judging. Students' awareness of their power through culture, race, and sex enhances their capacity to respond empathetically and protects them against reinforcing positions of power via the traps of stereotypes.

The Exercise: Student Pay-off

Encouraged by one another and supported by an atmosphere of trust, students should readily share and compare perceptions, and uncover the biases in their perceptions. Recognizing the normality of guardedness or overassertiveness, they are able to appreciate the concept of bias and to understand how it originates, is maintained, and creates a devaluing of diversity. This enhances their ability to perceive themselves and others more accurately while at the same time that they develop tolerance for differing perceptions in others and differences in general.

The opportunity for face-to-face encounters and a chance for sharing experiences and thinking (as freely as possible) within a neutral milieu can help students better understand themselves including their nagging irrationalities and stereotypes. Students also learn that the characteristics charted in the list prevail in perceptions (of complementary relationships) between empowered and powerless parties whether the relationships involve differences in class, race, sex, role, or ethnicity/culture.

A key objective of the experiential exercise presented in this paper is to help students understand that we are all diverse and different. As we tell our stories about our uniqueness, we lay out a mosaic of talents and skills. The underlying energy of power and powerless can thus meld into a force for individual and organizational effectiveness.

It should be noted that the experiential learning exercise can be supplemented with readings, films and videos, or other experiential components such as stories, posing dilemmas for minority/majority members, and role-plays. In addition, one of the authors (as well as many others) has developed a semester long course around the theme of diversity and differences.

Summary

An experiential learning exercise that focuses on issues of power as related to ethnic/culture identity enables students to (1) understand the complexities involved in valuing and managing differences, (2) recognize their own biases and understand the dynamics of those biases, (3) develop tolerance for differences in their own and others' perceptions and experiences, (4) understand feelings and behavior in any situation that involves a consistent differential of power, and (5) enhance their ability to perceive themselves and others accurately. These abilities and skills prepare students to value and manage diversity in their use of power. Moreover, the odds are improved for their joining with others in alliances in which everyone shares the power and responsibility for

understanding, valuing and managing diversity in organizations.

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