

BEYOND SEX, AGE, AND RACE: EXPLORING THE DEEPER CONTENTS OF DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This experiential exercise explores diversity as a management challenge that goes beyond gender, race, ethnicity or age differences. The exercise challenges students to examine the multiple contents for the concept of diversity and explore the management implications of that diversity. Additionally, the exercise provides the opportunity for student self-examination. Students are required to see their differences from the perspective of what benefits, and consequences, those differences will present to an employer.

PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Diversity in the work place is a topic that appears consistently in management texts. The topic is typically discussed in terms of what might be called “visible” characteristics like race, gender, ethnicity (in some cases) and age and “invisible” characteristics like ethnicity, religion, and perhaps abilities (or disabilities) (Loden and Rosener, 1991; Ledman and Brown, 1993; Judy and D’Amico, 1999). The subject is also typically discussed as something that organizations can benefit from if they embrace the benefits and effectively implement diversity management efforts (Loden and Rosener, 1991; Loveman and Gabarro, 1991). The challenge to professors is to bring life to the challenges and benefits of diversity (Sausser, 1993). Often students, especially undergraduates, have limited experience with diversity in a setting like a work place. I have grappled with this challenge because my students only represent minimal visible diversity among themselves. Therefore, I have been required to explore ways to present the management challenges of diversity by looking beyond the issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and age. This experiential exercise has met my objectives by showing significant benefits in improving students’ understanding of the diversity challenges of management. An additional outcome of this exercise is that students are faced with the need to examine what they bring to potential employers.

THE EXERCISE

Introduction of the Exercise (@5 minutes). This exercise explores the multitude of ways in which we are different and the benefits and challenges those differences can offer to managers. We often think of diversity in terms of sex (gender), race, ethnicity, age, national origin, or ability. However, a broader examination of diversity suggests that we all have characteristics that make us different—thus diverse. The challenge for managers is to capitalize on those differences for the good of the organization and the employees while effectively managing the challenges presented by those differences.

Step One (@5 minutes). In the next five minutes students are asked to write down three ways they are different and they can not identify gender, race, age, national origin, ethnicity, disability, or religion. This assignment can challenge students to do some serious self-examination since they have often not given much thought to the often “invisible” differences that exist between people.

Step Two (@10 minutes). Students are now asked to write down two ways the differences identified in step one can be beneficial to a potential employer, and be prepared to explain why. They are also asked to write down two challenges those differences might present to organizations or managers, and be prepared to explain why.

Step Three – Debriefing (@30-45 minutes). The debriefing begins with listing some of the differences on a blackboard or flip chart. Once the differences are listed students are asked to suggest ways the differences may be beneficial to potential employers and the challenges that may be presented to management. Typically, the student who identified a particular difference as applicable to him or her is asked to offer their suggestions first. This part of the discussion can be done as an entire class or in small groups. The students learn that the multitude of differences presented can all be beneficial to organizations if they effectively focus on the benefits of those differences and successfully manage the challenges presented.

To close the discussion, summarize by focusing on the many kinds of differences identified, the many benefits of those differences for organizations and the challenges that managers may have trying to effectively maximize the benefits. It is useful to also point out how the students were able, with some reflection, to discover characteristics about

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themselves that can make them valuable assets to organizations. Those characteristics are often not ones the students typically identified when asked in interviews what they could “bring to the table” to benefit a potential employer.

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