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### Organizational Culture and People with Disabilities

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For many years, diversity has been a major topic in management magazines, training workshops, and boardrooms. There have been many legitimate attempts to integrate people with disabilities and other under represented populations into organizations. How best to accomplish integration has become an important and controversial issue.

Only in recent decades have attempts to diversify organizations been demonstrated with a commitment by management to include those who have been traditionally discriminated against due to ethnicity, race, age, gender, or ability. In my opinion, however, it has been a long hard fight with only mixed results. With the amount of time and energy spent by organizations on this issue, business should be seeing diversity problems abating. Instead there are disproportionate numbers of unemployed in many of these populations. For example, 67% of adults with disabilities and 74% with severe disabilities are not working.<sup>1</sup> Among disabled minorities, the numbers are worse. According to the statistics from the 1994 U.S. census 72.2% of African Americans with disabilities and 85.5% with severe disabilities are not working and 51.9% of Hispanics with disabilities and 75.4% with severe disabilities are not working. To add further insult to injury those who are employed are likely to be underemployed.

Why is it important to employ these populations? First, through continued civil rights recognition and socio-economic standing our nation believes that every person should be afforded equal opportunity. Second, these diverse populations represent a wealth of untapped talent while corporations are paying large sums of money to bring in foreign nationals to remedy the recent labor shortage. Moreover, there is a strong desire among discriminated populations to work and contribute to their own and society's well being. Seventy-two percent of Americans with disabilities, 16 and older, who are unemployed want to work.

If all these Americans want to work and there is a shortage of workers in this country and organizations are spending time and money in diversity training activities, it would seem logical

that the problem should be approaching solution. However it is obvious that it is not.

There are two reasons why we have not solved the problem of diversity in the workplace. The first is perceptual and attitudinal barriers. Stereotyping is a practice with echoes from an unenlightened past. It is also about fear. How do I act? What if I say the wrong thing? Parents teach their children not to stare, but when a person in a wheelchair approaches them on the street the 'Do not stare' order becomes equivalent to 'Just ignore him.'

Many employers also perceive a legal barrier. They erroneously believe that hiring a person with a disability means he or she can never be fired because of legal entanglements resulting from a civil rights law such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. These are all perceptual/attitudinal barriers and are very difficult to overcome because what the perceiver sees is his or her perception of reality.

My research in recent years has focused on organizations and diverse populations, particularly the population of disabled persons. Research shows that perceptual barriers towards the disabled exist in the workplace. It also found that these obstacles can be ameliorated. Part of the problem is the affirmation process for the disabled individual and the employer. People with disabilities often need better qualifications than people without disabilities to achieve comparable employment (Klinger 1996). Disabled individuals may also feel the need to neutralize their handicap by adopting a self-exacting attitude. Exclusion often provides the impetus for the disabled individual to overcompensate. Through additional education or experience, they seek ways to prove themselves. In most situations once a person with a disability is hired, employers are satisfied with an employee's performance and encourage educational and promotional activities (Klinger 1996).

It seems that educational internships might be a way to help accomplish this need for additional credentialing. Although internships have been viewed in the past as unsuccessful by some, recent well-managed internship programs have shown very positive results. At my college I attempted to apply my finding that meaningful experience can assist people with disabilities to gain satisfying employment. Although the on-site supervisors of the internships were impressed with the abilities of the students, perceptual/attitudinal barriers appeared. My interns encountered misperceptions of their abilities. They were treated as though they were not capable of quality work and due to their lack of shared experiences, no bonding between peers took place. Jane is a good example.

Jane (not her real name) is a graduate of SUNY Empire State College who is blind. As a capstone for her degree in business with a concentration in Business Administration, she developed an internship with the principal of a local school. After discussions with the principal, Jane and I were comfortable that she would be doing suitable work commensurate with her major and

her future goals. A few weeks later I found Jane answering the office phones and doing typing. After pointed discussions with Jane and the principal we worked through some obvious perceptual/attitudinal barriers. Jane eventually was doing work at the school that was akin to a business program developer and garnering rave reviews from the administration.

So why is this happening? Why do people with disabilities need to prove themselves in order to gain suitable employment? Why is it so difficult to set up a meaningful internship experience? I have identified one area - perceptual and attitudinal barriers. I also believe that there are other hurdles to overcome in what organizational behaviorists call the culture of many organizations.

According to Edgar Schein (1992), the guru in this area, organizational culture is:

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group [organization] learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Most organizational cultures were formed from the initial successes of an organization, years before people with disabilities were attempting to achieve equality in the workplace. For example, until thirty years ago most people with disabilities were either in institutions or hidden at home and, therefore, not easily recognized in the cultures of an organization. I would contend that with the structure of most existing cultures and the ever-present perceptual/attitudinal barriers that an easy infusion of under represented populations into the workplace is not possible.

The techniques used today and in the past have only allowed for a person hired by an organization to assimilate into that culture, a process known in popular parlance as 'learning to fit in.' This is difficult enough for anyone new to a job, but it may be an insurmountable task for someone who is perceived as different and is not acknowledged by the culture. Placement services sometimes use the 'beg, place, and pray' technique (Fabian et al. 1994). Counselors beg a company to hire a person with a disability, place them, and then pray that it works.

I contend that there must be a better, more effective, and more successful approach. The burden needs to be placed on the organization rather than on the new employee. There needs to be a way to recognize diversity as an asset in organizations so that under represented populations can become part of the culture. Effective cultural change can be a slow process. I believe that good, solid internship-type experiences that are sustained and promoted throughout the organization can begin to produce a cultural change that allows a more accepting atmosphere for

people with disabilities. A well-managed internship program will create successes and will effect change.

There are a number of excellent internship programs for people with disabilities in existence. We need to promote such programs and seek out others. Research is also needed in the areas of organizational culture and change models that will assist us in this goal.

The perceptual/attitudinal barriers and the culture of organizations both have a detrimental effect on the opportunities for people with disabilities. The goal of creating a model for cultural change that will stimulate a new way of thinking in organizations will assist organizations to readily accept all people into their ranks.

#### Endnote

1. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a severe disability means that a person cannot perform one or more activities of daily living, has at least one specific impairment, or is a long-time user of assistive devices.

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