Creating an Adaptable Workforce by Engaging with all Employees

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Abstract:

This paper approaches Adaptation and Engagement through a head/heart/hands model that is the basis of the Global Diversity Survey$^©$ (GDS), a successful online self-assessment tool. The GDS assesses three main constructs; insight (head), inclusion (heart) and adaptation (hands). Insight refers to the ability to see oneself, others and the world in an unbiased way. Inclusion focuses on efforts to make all people feel that they are included and part of a team. Finally, Adaptation looks at one's ability to change one's own behavior to meet the needs of people from diverse backgrounds. Adaptation requires Engagement as well as Communication and Problem-solving skills. Engagement can thus be seen as a first step towards effective communications and collaborative problem-solving. The paper then explores what engagement strategies look like at both the personal and the organizational level, and what Adaptability looks like across a selection of key cultural dimensions.

Keywords: Adaptation, Engagement, Workforce Diversity, People Strategies

The approach to Adaptation & Engagement in this paper derives from the model at the heart of the Global Diversity Survey$^©$ (GDS), a successful online self-assessment tool that has been in use over the past six years [1]. The GDS is a self-administered, self-scoring tool that aims to help people enhance their competency to manage and value diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

The GDS was designed as a global self-assessment tool given the lack, at the time, of such a tool. There were a number of diversity assessments but they appeared to be too American, and not usable globally, and there were cultural assessments, but they focused solely on cultural dimensions, thereby excluding some of the key diversity dimensions (such as age, gender, disability, religion, etc). One of the key assumptions behind the development of the GDS was to be systemic both psychologically and sociologically. Psychologically, this meant that the GDS had to cover rational, emotional and behavioral components of diversity and inclusion, and sociologically it had to cover individual, organizational and societal levels, to be comprehensive.

Consequently, the GDS assesses three constructs, namely ***insight (head), inclusion (heart)*** and ***adaptation (hands)*** using the Hx3 model [2]. Insight refers to the ability to see oneself, others and the world around one in an unbiased way. Inclusion focuses on one's actual efforts in making all people feel that they are included and part of a team. Finally, Adaptation looks at one's ability to change one's own behavior so that one can be effective in communication and collaboration with people from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, the GDS measures across three levels, namely the Self, Others, and the World. So if we now focus on Adaptation, it requires the following competencies: at the self-level: Engagement; at the other-level: Communication; and at the world-level: Problem-solving.

Consequently, Engagement is the self-level component of Adaptation. Unless we personally are willing to **engage** across differences we have no chance of building a diverse and inclusive workplace and society. Engagement can thus be seen as a first step towards improved communications, constructive/collaborative problem-solving, and a more productive workplace with high morale.

At the individual level there are many strategies for increasing engagement. Here are just two to consider for leaders:

A. Maintain and develop a wide, diverse network of social and intellectual contacts, and attend and participate in diverse events.

B. Learn to adapt your leadership style across cultural differences.

For strategy A, the requirement is to venture outside one's comfort zone and proactively reach out to people and networks that may not be easy or comfortable, but can be very rewarding in expanding one's social and business world. Being a role model for engagement of this kind may well develop greater engagement among employees. At a basic level, this may involve seeking out and engaging people who are different from you, in cultural ways, functional ways, or even across age generations. Generational diversity is becoming a vibrant part of today's workforce where older and younger workers now work together. For the first time in the business world we have four generations of workers present at work: Veterans (born pre-1945), Boomers or baby-boomers (post WWII - 1946-64), Gen-Xers (1965-80) and the new Gen-Ys, little emperors (in China) or Millennials (1981-2000), and each generation has its own view of work, communication style, values, motivations, worldview, etc.. To enhance engagement and inclusion across generations some organizations have introduced "Bring your Parents to Work Day" in addition to the more traditional "Take your Children to Work Day." Corning in New York, introduced the former as early as 1997. Ogilvy and SHRM have done this more recently [3].

For strategy B, a huge field of intercultural studies has evolved with many pointers for adaptation across cultural dimensions. For example on the Individualism-Collectivism dimension, Individualists working in Collectivist cultures (e.g., Americans in Japan) have to learn to show patience in team decision-making; understand the importance of building long-lasting relationships, and accept the extended family concept. While, conversely, Collectivists working in Individualist cultures (e.g. Indians working in the UK) must adapt to be open to quick decisions and quick deal making; accept the task focus of individualists, and not expect to always rely on the group to provide answers. This is especially poignant for leaders who typically want to impose their own style on the teams they lead, but smart leaders are ones with the adaptive skills to engage followers from different cultures.

Similarly, along the Direct-Indirect communications dimension, speakers from Indirect cultures working in Direct cultures (e.g. Thais in Germany) need to learn to respond to expression and directness in what is said, and learn not to take directness too personally. While speakers from Direct cultures working in Indirect cultures (e.g. Danes in Korea) need to learn to focus on how things are said, and learn to deal with silence as a part of communications, without rushing in to fill the "void". These adaptive techniques can greatly help leaders and workers across all functions – sales, operations, support, etc.

When using the GDS assessment tool with large employee groups we are able to examine aggregate scores, and when an organization shows weakness in the Engagement box, we propose a wide range of organizational strategies; here are some:

1. Analyze what motivates employees and focus on the strongest motivators.
2. Encourage and promote employee networks in your organization and seek ways to strategically leverage them.
3. Create (or rework) the performance management system to recognize and reward inclusion and innovative and adaptive behaviors globally.
4. Analyze the current community involvement of your organization to look for new opportunities to serve the community and the world.

For strategy 1, it is critical to understand the variety of motivations that people have to work productively. Besides salary/pay there are many others including a sense of belonging, a chance to grow, learn and develop, a recognition and appreciation of their work, etc. It is interesting that Gallup's famous Q12 survey of Employee Engagement includes the question "do you have a best friend at work?" [4]. The return on investment for employee engagement is startlingly obvious. SAS, which has led the 100 Best Companies list for 13 years, has a 2% annual turnover rate (compared to 22% average) because of its benefits. These include: on-site child care, on-site medical center, fitness center, sauna, library, summer camp for children, etc. [5].

For strategy 2, engagement through employee resource groups (ERGs) (also called affinity groups or networks) has also been a smart retention tool for many companies [6]. Over 90% of Fortune 500 companies have ERGs and these groups can increase retention by reducing social isolation. Aetna uses its ERGs for everything from creating products that address ethnic disparities to translation of corporate documents. Aetna claims its ERGs not only improve employee relations but also its link to its customers.

For strategy 3, it is important that performance management systems recognize personal empowerment as an enhancement to engagement. When employees have a sense of ownership and empowerment over their work, engagement, productivity and innovation tends to increase. Google, which was #4 in Fortune's "100 Best Places to Work," allows their engineers to devote 20% of their time to projects of their own choosing [5]. Given Google's market cap it is hard to argue against empowerment and some control of one's work as a successful tool for engagement.

Finally, strategy 4 is essentially the CSR (corporate social responsibility) initiative, which assumes that by connecting the company to a purpose beyond the purely financial, and connecting with positive social and global issues, the engagement of employees will be greatly enhanced. Some of the best practices in CSR include:

- The organization supports the contribution of employee time, energy, and ideas to social and environmental concerns.
- Facilities are located to serve and promote economic growth of the whole community, and particularly communities or groups that have been historically ignored, or that are in the greatest need.
- The organization considers corporate social responsibility more than just philanthropy and mainstreams it into everyday business practice.
- The organization vigorously supports human rights and environmental sustainability in all its actions. [7]

All people are values-driven and want to feel proud of their organization and what it stands for. Hence CSR is both a powerful engagement tool for employees worldwide, and can be seen as a smart adaptable organizational strategy for the organization.

Implicit in CSR, as well as all the other strategies described in this paper, is the proposition that the value of business comprises of not just financial capital, but also of people capital, organizational capital and customer capital, which all strongly rely upon successful engagement and adaptation strategies.

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