

The challenges of managing a diverse workforce in the public service

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Abstract

The dynamic of the world is such that nothing stays the same. Over the past decades, there has been a need to support diversity willingly. The concept of diversity, after numerous studies, has brought up the perception of positive outcomes when we put together teams from diverse backgrounds. With immigration rates growing higher, communities are becoming more and more diverse. As a result, the workforce is also changing, and it is only fair that those in charge of personnel learn how to navigate the new trends. To bring concrete answers that fit a growing diverse citizenship, it should be executives' goal to hire a diverse workforce and create a company structure and culture that embraces said diversity. It is a challenge to manage an array of differences, but with the right methods and initiatives, managers can create safe platforms for all.

Introduction

In the last four decades, we have seen the government effort to ensure that all citizens who desire to work within the public sector are offered fair employment and opportunities with equal Employment Opportunities Act and Affirmative Action. Those programs were the cornerstone of a movement that has become broader than just an issue of race, which has divided America since its foundation. From those programs, diversity management was born and was aimed at the maximization of individual skills. We cannot achieve diversity if the employees do not participate in implementing actions toward this goal. Implementing diversity can be cumbersome and presents various challenges to managers and leaders. It will require skills and proper leadership to ensure that employees understand the importance and benefits of having a diverse workforce and their input in aligning this winning strategy. Employees need to have open minds and embrace diversity for what it is; without this collaboration, the organization will not ascend to that desired level of efficacy that comes with diversity.

There has been some sort of reckoning in all sectors, and companies' effort to be inclusive in their hiring process have been witnessed firsthand. The literature on the subject has raved about the possible benefits of having a heterogeneous workforce. Individuals of different backgrounds tend to bring rather different perspectives on most common issues, which is key to creativity and innovation within departments and companies. The homogenous workplace was one of the significant trends of past workforce dynamics. Employees were similar in many ways, and their mannerisms were common and uniform. Employees were pushed to have a similar understanding of how to approach issues; every employee's thought process in the same organization was highly identical. They did not praise differences; they were avoided and relinquished to a level of non-importance. Nowadays, organizations are seeking the advantages that those differences can bring. After all, we offer services to an ever-changing, diverse community, and it is essential to

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understand the mindset and the expectation of said clientele. A diverse workforce gives that fresh perspective that would not have been attainable with a homogenous workforce. This talk on diversity in the public workforce today would not have been possible without regulations aimed at dismantling the homogenous white male-dominated workforces such as Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action.

The evolution to a more diverse workforce

The 1960s was a determining decade for the United States to fight against discrimination by working toward equality. The result of many years of fighting by the African American communities has resulted in the Passage of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. This law encompasses the Equal Employment Opportunity laws aimed at reducing discrimination based on race, color, religion, and sex in the workplace. The objectives of the Equal Employment opportunity laws were to allow fair consideration of the protected classes. The employers should present them with the same opportunity that the white males are offered in the workforce. But there were numerous flaws to this law, as it did not create any channels to ensure growth for the protected classes. Although offered new opportunities in the workforce with the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Act, people of color and women, were still not represented reasonably within public services organizations and agencies. They were relegated to positions such as in clerical and low-level jobs and were regardless discriminated against when it came to growth and within their organizations. Unfortunately, even with Equal Employment Opportunity laws, the workforce was not a great representation of America's communities. Regardless of the law, fair treatment was still a massive issue in the public workforce. The workforce was predominantly male and white.

Further strategies were to be considered to remediate those ongoing and past discriminations. Executive Order 11246 and 11375, signed into law respectively in 1965 and 1967,

presented a new strategy. Affirmative Action was born. It is the "proactive" policy of making special efforts in employment decisions, college entrance, and other areas of public behavior as a way of compensating for past discrimination. The law originated from the thought that certain groups of people are at a disadvantage in the workplace due to past discrimination against some of their members. These measures were necessary even in the absence of current discrimination against the vulnerable group members (Lee, 1999). It was a strategy used to level the field for those who have been singled out. Even with Equal Opportunity offered, they were nonetheless at a disadvantage. This gap needed to be filled so they could obtain positions to be seen and gain opportunities that they would not have otherwise.

Affirmative action seeks to temporarily increase employment, educational, and societal opportunities for qualified members of underrepresented groups. The executive order applies to all federal agencies, contractors, and subcontractors, including all the agency's facilities holding the contract. Contractors and subcontractors with more than fifty thousand dollars in government business and fifty or more employees were prohibited from discriminating. Still, they must also take affirmative action to ensure that applicants and employees are not treated differently based on their sex, religion, race, color, or national origin (Pynes, 2009). Organizations were expected to deploy resources to ensure that people in designated categories receive fair treatment. Affirmative action required employers to take positive steps toward hiring, promoting, and retaining qualified women, people of color, and other protected class persons (Ricucci, 2002). Proponents of Affirmative action had hoped that it would create a more representative bureaucracy that would reflect the demographics of the population they are servicing. The organizations were thus pushed to develop plans that encourage diversity within their walls.

In the last three decades in America, demographics have been reshaped because of increasing immigration, primarily from Asia and Latin America, enhanced by representation of persons with

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disabilities, and the maturation of the baby boomer generation (Selden & Selden, 2001). While in the 1980s, whites accounted for approximately 80% of the population, by 2000, this number registered a considerable decrease to around 69% (Bureau of Statistics and Labor) (see figure 1). The non-white population has been growing ever since, and the nation is now witnessing a significant shift that will continue to grow in the 21st century. The country is becoming more diverse, and advances in technology allow people with disabilities to be more functional.

Workforce Demographics (1990- 2020 projected)

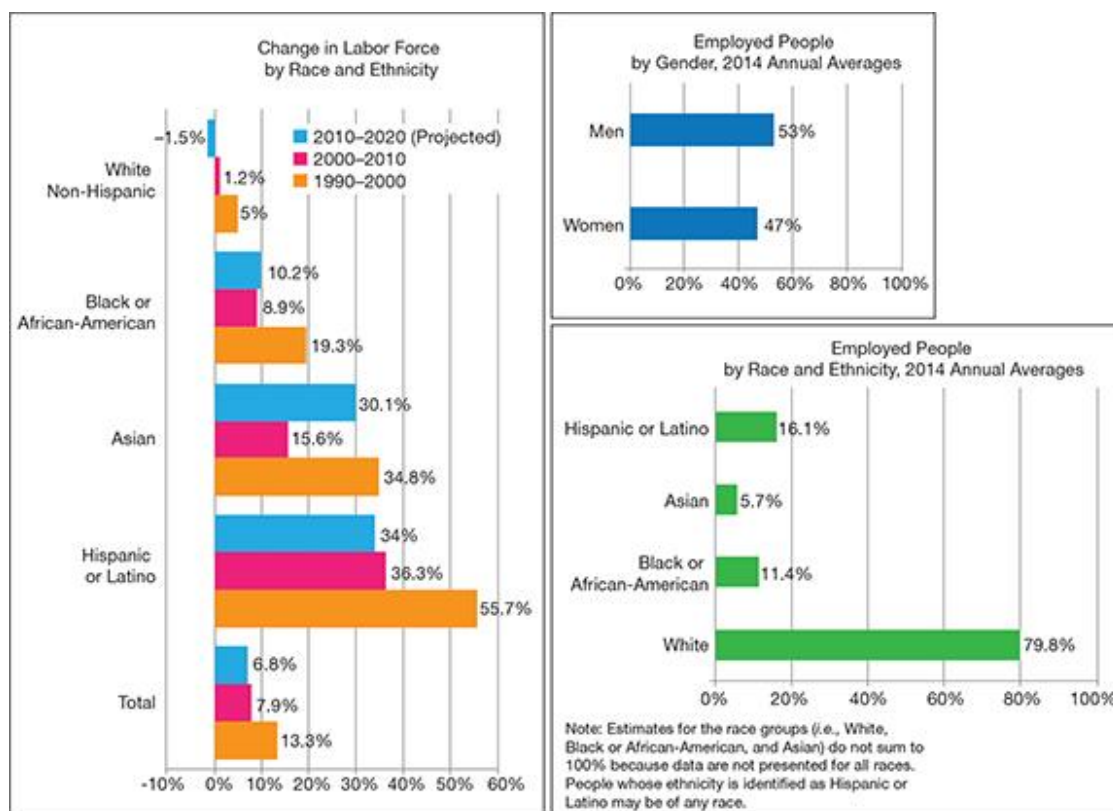


Figure 1. The demographics of the workforce are changing. Today's workforce is more racially and ethnically diverse and includes more women than in the past. Although the U.S. labor force's annual growth rate is expected to slow, the degree of diversity is expected to continue to increase. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

Furthermore, the current workforce is aging and beginning to retire. All those new experiences throughout the years have triggered a lot of changes in the workforce. In 2008, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that white males accounted for only 37% of the workforce. The growing rate of retirement in the workforce has contributed to more hiring within a more diverse individual pool, hence more efforts towards hiring and retaining a diverse workforce.

Multiple studies have already shown that diversity is a trend that might be the key to organizational competitiveness. The tables below (figure 2 and 3) illustrate the changes that are taking place progressively in the public sector toward a more diverse workplace.

Executive Branch Employment by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender (in percentages)

	1984	1988	1992	1996	1997	1998
African American	15.7	16.6	16.5	16.8	16.7	16.7
Hispanic	4.7	5.4	5.5	5.4	6.2	6.4
Asian American	2.8	3.6	3.8	3.6	4.4	4.5
Native American	1.7	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.1	2.1
Total Minorities	24.9	27.7	27.8	27.7	29.4	29.7
White, Non-Hispanic	75.1	72.3	72.3	72.3	40.6	70.3
Men	60.0	58.0	56.6	56.0	50.8	56.0
Women	40.0	42.0	43.0	44.0	44.2	44.0

Figure 2. SOURCE: Adapted from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (1998a).

Percentage of Executive Branch Employees with Disabilities

	1986	1990	1994	1997
Employees with Disabilities	6.6	6.9	7.4	7.2

Figure 3.- Source: Adapted from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (1998b.)

Hiring diversity comes with great challenges. Managers were to deploy more efforts to create a structure where they could grow and feel valued just like any other employee in the organization and ensure their integration and efficiency. Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action have created the need for a different perspective on workforce management and the creation of programs that fitted and heterogenous personnel.

The new workplace diversity

In the 21st century, the meaning of diversity has considerably shifted. If diversity is to be managed, it is essential to understand what it means and what it entails. So far, Equal Employment Opportunities and Affirmative Action have emphasized diversity but as a racial concept. Often, gender and disability are thrown into the pool. But, diversity is so much more than just race, gender, and disabilities. It encompasses much broader elements. Scholars have eloquently defined

the concept in many ways. It refers to differences in underlying attributes or non-observable differences, such as working styles, values, and personality types, as well as differences in culture, socioeconomic background, educational background, spirituality, occupational background, or professional orientation, industry experience, organizational membership, group tenure, and spirituality (Denhardt & Leland, 2003; Milliken & Martins, 1996). From Ewoh's (2013) point of view, "diversity is to be seen as the collective, all-inclusive mixture of human differences and similarities, including educational background, geographic origin, sexual preference, profession, culture, political affiliation, tenure in an organization and other socioeconomic, psychographic and ethnic-racial characteristics". Hazard (2004) also defines workplace diversity as a broad range of differences that influence how people interact and achieve business results. Since the common trend here is an emphasis and recognition of all of an individual differences, not just a matter of race and sex. Therefore, in the workplace, diversity management is to ensure that each employee is aware of those differences and can interact accordingly with their peers without prejudice.

Workplace diversity can be characterized as an organization in which employees possess distinct elements and qualities, differing from one another. Those elements will be translated as their ethnicity, gender, age, lifestyle, physical abilities, sexual orientation. When channeled right, diversity is known to bring more significant innovation and creative ideas that can make the success of an organization. A diverse group caters to more discussions among peers in search of better outcomes that encompass a broader perspective. But managing such a diverse group does not come without any hurdles.

Human resources managers have a lot to do to ensure that diversity does not stop at employment and that adequate programs are created to retain their diverse workforce and make them feel comfortable. As stated in Sabharwal (2014), the issue is not about diversity itself, but

the challenge lies in integrating and utilizing a diverse workforce toward achieving organizational goals (Pless & Maak, 2004). While Title VII of the Civil Right Act of 1964, affirmative action, and equal employment legislation have helped diversify the workforce, they have not always helped create an environment of inclusion wherein the full potential of diverse employees is realized (Mor Barak, 1999; Mor Barak, 2011). The concept of diversity will go beyond the creation of race-conscious programs. Thus, we have graduated from leveling the field for minorities to create an environment where employees are trained and made aware of differences. They are urged to alter their behavior and attitudes for more tolerant and welcoming workplaces. And, this strategy goes beyond what we could have accomplished with just affirmative action and equal employment opportunity. Diversity management involves going beyond an accommodation of individual difference to a situation whereby organizational culture is reformed to value and respect it. Diversity can address a more comprehensive section of the working population than the more specific Equal Employment Opportunities and Affirmative Action targets (Steger & Erwee,2001).

Although Organizations in the 21st century are putting more emphasis on diversity as a more inclusive concept than just race, we should not forget that all this progress that we are witnessing in the workforce would not have been possible without the foundation that those pioneers' programs have brought. The perspectives are different (See figure 4), but the vision of "a diverse workforce" remains the same. From the figure depicted, we can see a slow shift from equal employment opportunity to Affirmative action to diversity. When looking at the three perspectives' premises, we can comprehend why diversity is being sought and that organizations are being less inclined to just comply with the law. A broad view of diversity has implications for the prevailing organizational culture and an appreciation of difference.

Figure 4.- Comparing three perspectives on diversity in the workplace

	Equal Employment Opportunity	Affirmative Action	Diversity
Source	Statute	Executive Order and federal regulations	Human resources specialist in academic and organizational settings
Rationale for adoption	Legal compliance	Legal compliance for contractors	Strategic advantages
Implicit Cultural values	Egalitarianism, meritocracy	Remedy past wrongs	Inclusiveness, respect for differences
View of the problem	Limited access and Individual Bigotry	Limited access, coupled, coupled with Limited networks and skills	Organizations lose out by requiring workers to assimilate to white male system
View of solutions	Formalization and commitment to nondiscrimination will need for minorities' and women' advancement	Targeted programs for recruitment mentoring and training will need for minorities' and women' advancement	Culture change efforts will remove Institutional, systemic barriers blocking Minorities and women' advancement
Concrete Practices	Policies, Statements, grievance procedures, the internal dispute resolution system	Affirmative action plan with goals and timetables, revision of performance review criteria, sensitivity and interaction skills training, networking and support groups, targeted recruiting and targeted training	Policies, Statements, diversity action plans with goals and timetables, revision of performance review criteria skills training, networking, and support groups, diversity task forces, and culture audits.
Concrete effects	Workers have recourse, within the organization, for dealing with discrimination	Minorities and women brought into and moved up into the pipeline	Unclear

Source: Adapted from Kelly and Dobbin (1990, p. 976).

Note: EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY= equal employment opportunity; AFFIRMATIVE ACTION = affirmative action

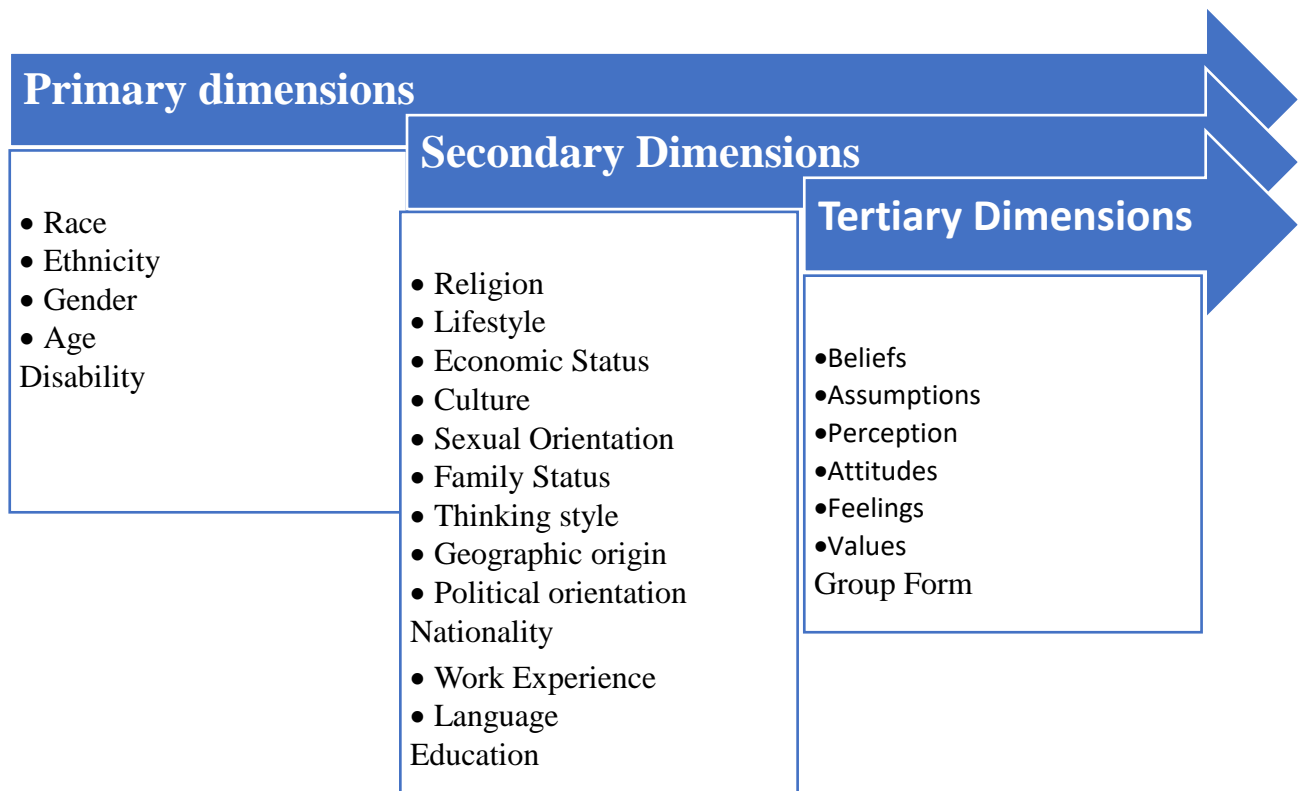
In contrast, narrow definitions of diversity focus on eliminating discriminatory practices based on personal characteristics. A broad understanding of diversity thus, affects the organization at all levels. At the same time, narrow definitions appear to be of similar orientation as Affirmative Action (AA) and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) initiatives (Steger and Erwee, 2001).

The importance of diversity in public workplace

Evidence is growing that managing diversity leads to greater service effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity. Diversity can lead to more creative alternatives and higher - quality ideas, primarily from introducing different and opposing opinions and viewpoints (Pynes, 2009). We have seen in Figure 5 all the parameters that constitute an individual. Those parameters make one's experience and upbringing unique. With that said, it gives each group a unique perspective on subjects. That expertise combined provides a group with a better understanding of issues and allows them to make better decisions. In the public sector, we serve a clientele as diverse as it comes; with a heterogeneous group, we can have insight from individuals from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages. These teams also seem to have a higher productivity rate simply because each brings a set of various tools to the table, from different kinds of experiences and training (Le, 2008). That allows managers to have a better understanding of the need of the diverse population. In Cox & Blake (year?), homogeneous teams' creativity on a series of attitude measures was compared against teams with heterogeneous attitudes. Problem solution creativity was judged on originality and practicality. Results indicated that if the team members had similar ability levels, the heterogeneous teams were more creative than the homogeneous ones (1991). Researchers have suggested that diversity has enhanced performance by broadening the group's perspectives. There is a strong empirical confirmation that successful diversity management and a resulting organizational performance improvement are positively correlated (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008).

Suppose we manage diversity well, and the right programs are created to ensure everyone's full integration in the workforce. In that case, the organization will be able to attract the right candidate. Sabharwal (2014) found that policies such as alternative work arrangements, mentoring, flextime, and telework currently serve as the cornerstone of diversity management initiatives deemed necessary in improving performance (Choi & Rainey, 2010; Pitts, 2009).

Figure 5 -Parameters of diversity



THE CHALLENGES OF A DIVERSE WORKPLACE

a.) Perceptions

Groups performing distinct tasks are at the core of organizations, and when grouped, they produce a unique outcome: a service. In that same analogy, each group includes individuals

different from each other on various parameters but are to come together to accomplish those unique tasks. Managers are called to consider each one of those parameters to ensure perfect cohesion to bring all those individuals together and form a unit of decision-making efficiency. The first set of dimensions (see table 5), we are born with or within and have a significant impact on us from an early age. They constitute a big part of who we are and will become. The second dimension we acquired throughout our lives and are modifiable as we see fit. In his paper *Managing and Valuing diversity*, Ewoh pointed out that "the linkages and the dynamic interaction of these dimensions help make them very powerful in shaping individual experiences that can be carried over to the work environment. Generally, these diversity dimensions are key elements in people's identities, and they do much to shape human values, perceptions, priorities, and experiences throughout life.

Furthermore, Patrick and Kumar (2012) also agree that diversity involves how people perceive themselves and how they perceive others. Those perceptions affect their interactions. For employees to operate as a unit effectively within an organization, human resources professionals need to deal effectively with issues such as communication, adaptability, and change". Perceptions that we have of one other affect in many ways how interactions are made in the workforce and can hinder the benefits we can gain from the pool of skills, knowledge, and creativity that we can obtain in a diverse environment. Ultimately, diversity must be integrated into all systems and activities. However, before institutionalizing the process, diversity must be accepted, respected, and valued by all employees (Ewoh, 2013).

b.) The high cost of a diverse workforce

We have elaborated below that one of the significant barriers in a diverse workforce is the perceptions that everyone has of each other and the concept of diversity. Therefore, managers need

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to work around each of those perceptions to maintain an efficient team. Each team member needs to be considered, so no one feels discriminated against or feels unimportant because of its background or beliefs. For maximized effectiveness, managers need to be thoroughly trained to overcome those hurdles. There is a myriad of workshops and seminars available that caters to those organizational needs to build and nurture their diverse workforce. Those training pieces are value-added to the company that will serve as a glue to maintain an efficient team. They are a costly investment in terms of time and money.

c.) Discrimination

In creating a diverse workforce, we are putting together multitudes of beliefs, perceptions, lifestyles, and backgrounds. Because of the human tendency to group with what seems familiar, we can consciously or unconsciously display behaviors that could be discriminatory to other group members. Those behaviors will affect the dynamic of the group and produce the reverse sought efficiency outcome. A clear example is that even when women account for a high percentage of the workforce, they are often passed on opportunities, because management feels that such positions will interfere with their family responsibilities. Riccucci (2002) reported that women continue to be segregated into departments and jobs traditionally associated with "women work" and concentrated in lower-level, lower-paying jobs. Therefore, they are not considered for opportunities in ways equal to their male counterparts.

d.) Communication

Immigration in the US is high, and the workforce is formed with individuals from different countries who had to learn English as a second language. Messages might be challenging to circulate. They may also be difficult to understand properly. And, according to Foma (2014), the

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challenge is communication problems in work environments and how they hinder workers' performance when left unresolved.

Diversity management in the workplace

Hence, managing diversity is about creating a safe environment where each employee is valued regarding their differences. A manager's role is to make them feel included to feel safe to participate fully in the organization activities and work toward the goals and objectives. Managing diversity is focused on the assumption that diverse segments will create new working methods and that morale, profit, and productivity will increase (Schoenfeldt, and Shaw, 1999); it is the next iteration of the continuum. "It refers to the ability of top management to develop strategies as well as programs and policies to manage and accommodate diversity in their workplace" (Ricucci, 2002, p. #). Workers would quit a job where they feel out of place or misunderstood. Therefore, when a workplace celebrates those differences by giving employees resources appropriate to their needs and a safe environment, they have opened themselves to unlimited potential.

Diversity management should be at the core of every project and decision undertaken by management. It should not be an afterthought. Just like a car needs to be maintained and oiled to ensure proper work, diversity management needs to also be nurtured. Van der Walt & Du Plessis, (2010) could not be more right when they stated that "if diversity management is not implemented correctly and reviewed regularly, it leads to employee dissatisfaction and loss of productivity" (p. 3). And it goes beyond a few diversity seminars and workshop. Building an inclusive environment is a combination of commitment from the top employers, respect for diverse opinions and perspectives, and an institution that fosters equitable policies (Bendick et al., 2010). Managing and incorporating diversity in a workplace takes work and dedication from every individual from top executives to bottom line employees.

While equal employment opportunity and affirmative action put more emphasis on hiring and allowing diversity to enter public services, there was not enough thought put into laying down a substantial plan to facilitate the underrepresented working conditions. Diversity management has been characterized as a function of human resource management (Mathews, 1998). The policies and programs that constitute the diversity management function vary substantially between organizations, including mentoring opportunities, training programs, and family-friendly policies.

Those parameters (as indicated in Figure 5) grouped in three dimensions can easily be managed when armed with the right tools. Creating a culture of openness and acceptance by implementing programs that encourage employees to value diversity is probably one of the most critical steps in managing a diverse workplace. Employees' perceptions are one of the biggest drivers of the behavior of the group; it is then trivial to guide one's behavior toward embracing differences among peers. The recognition of social differences in society as assets rather than a source of conflict should be a prime concern of managers. Such an approach is the unique way that one's will be able to use the full potential, knowledge, abilities, and skills across the organization. Various programs can be used to promote acceptance of each other and allow the valuation of those differences. Managers can organize team-building exercises and workshops that encourage inclusiveness. The more employees learn about each other and learn about cultural and racial differences, the easier it will be for managers to create synergy within their group.

To retain a diverse workforce, HR managers need to be mindful of the differences and ensure proper integration of minority and culturally different employees. Managers need to make sure that employees receive mentorship and training, so they do not feel left out. They need to ensure that the same opportunities are being offered to every employee regardless of their age, social background, religion, and gender.

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To manage effectively in a diverse environment, a diversity manager needs to acquire and nurture some skills. Griggs and Louw (1995) elaborated on some suggestions to help them succeed in this path among them, the education of section managers about the benefits of a diverse workforce and how they can promote more inclusivity in their department. They could also create mentorship programs to ensure that everyone has the same opportunity to advance their careers. And create accountability measures to guarantee that those implementations are being followed and promoted throughout the company.

Conclusion

The benefits of a diverse workforce are numerous, and we cannot deny that it has brought many benefits to the public workforce. With a growing diverse population, we are creating programs and services for a clientele that does not respond to one-service-fits-all type of programs. As decision-makers, we need to tackle an issue from all of its angles to bring concrete solutions in everyone's best interests. Indeed, we can attest that diversity within organizations intensifies employees' abilities to bring a new set of perspectives and problem-solving skills. Diversity gives organizations a competitive advantage as it enables them to take on new challenges with a highly flexible and highly heterogeneous team. Diversity has brought organizations a myriad of skills and opportunities that homogeneous workplaces would not have provided.

The path to diversity as we know it was not easy. Throughout history, we have witnessed minorities fight for equal opportunities and respect in the workforce. Both Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action require legislative action that will progressively grow into broader trends called diversity management. Simple recognition of the different characteristics of gender and skin color need to be broadened into a more inclusive pool of considerations toward individuals, including: people with disabilities, different backgrounds, sexual orientations,

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ethnicities, and religious beliefs. In sum, diversity encompasses every aspect that makes individuals different. Some feel threatened by such trends, but adjustment to the changes is necessary.

Although beneficial, managing diversity presents numerous challenges to managers in their quest for efficiency and organizational productivity. Individual perceptions of each other and themselves are among the biggest challenges that managers face in the workplace. They hinder the team's capacity to communicate appropriately and exchange freely to boost their efficiency. They may promote discrimination of all sorts and non-acceptance of each other's differences, which can be detrimental to organizational productivity. Language barriers are another issue that can present themselves. Miscommunication can also harm the organization's capacities. Those issues can be prevented by proper organizational strategy and planning that promotes diversity. Managers can create plans to train their team on diversity and acceptance of each other's differences. They need to bring awareness of how diversity is aligned with the organization's goals, and how it can help their team achieve the level of efficiency that they praise.

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