



Leading and Working Together in a World of Diversity: Unity Through Communication

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Executive Summary

Lack of effective leadership leads to a world filled with “haves” and “have nots”. We always feel some uneasiness when interacting with someone whose background differs from our own. The fact is that the injustice of prejudicial acts toward those different from ourselves hurts everyone. Leaders cannot afford to be complacent. Until we get out of our comfortable “shells” and explore the diversity in our surroundings, little will change in the world and social injustice will live and flourish in the workplace. We must drive out fear. The more we can dialogue with diverse groups the better off we will be. It is fear that keeps us apart. Rather than live “in fear” of someone different from us or a group from another culture, seek to learn through communication about the person or group.

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In 1975 Barnlund asked, "Can we generate the new cultural attitudes required by our technological virtuosity" (cited in Samovar and Porter, 1991b, p.23)? This question looms even more importantly as we approach the 21st century. Can we live and work in a world of diversity?

Increased emphasis on the importance of cross-cultural communication and global education are clear signs of our recognition that we live in a global society. Nwanko (1979) has suggested successful international communication is a necessity for survival as nations and individuals become increasingly more dependent on one another. Dealing competently with people from different nations and locations is no longer limited to the experience of a few, but a requirement for anyone who wants to effectively fulfill a leadership position.

Too often in the past we have been satisfied with and accepted egocentric behaviors as acceptable standards of human interaction. Many times our acceptance of such behaviors has led to periods of ethnocentrism in our society. In fact, periods of ethnocentric thinking became so entrenched the result has been extended periods of isolationism. Today the reality is that our world must be polycentric, and such is an even more pressing reality for the 21st century.

As Barnlund (1975) notes, technology impacts our daily lives. As the "world shrinks" we can no longer be satisfied with staying "safe" within our little groups who are familiar, yes, ever similar to us. We must accept the principle that we share this planet with people of very diverse personal and cultural backgrounds. If humankind is to survive and thrive, it will be necessary for leadership to provide open and supportive workplaces through effective communication.

Such unity will require leaders who can communicate with a variety of people and cultures. These leaders must be able to effectively communicate with different "others" as well as those with whom they know and feel comfortable.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present a strategy for effective leader communication behaviors that promote working together in diverse settings. To achieve this purpose we will examine the following issues: (a) diversity, (b) importance and role of communication, (c) leadership, and (d) strategies for enhancing leadership in diverse contexts.

Background and Justification

It is important to consider these issues because, as Simons (1989) notes, "Dominant cultures change and lose their dominant status" (p.65). Scott and Jaffe (1991) cite data supporting the belief that the traditional white male work force in the United States no longer exists. They point out that figures show women representing at least 52% of those working in the United States. By the year 2000 women will comprise 66% of those entering the workplace. And, by 2025 only 15% of those entering the work force will be white males. The U.S.

labor statistics suggest by this time nearly 33% of the work force will be women and men of color. Thus, the 21st century will need leaders capable of dealing with increasing numbers of workers from diverse cultural backgrounds in the work force.

Along with the changes above, there is a continuing trend to promote empowered workplaces. Such working environments will need leaders who recognize the benefits of teamwork. These leaders will need to involve others and support a diverse work force in accomplishing the goals and objectives set for their organizations.

Conflict is inevitable. In interdependent team oriented workplaces trust is essential. Therefore, leaders will need to demonstrate effective communication as they work within a culturally diverse workplace.

In *Workforce 2000* by the Hudson Institute, they claim "the foundation of national wealth is really people--the human capital" (cited in Scott & Jaffe, 1991, p.3). It is the knowledge, skills, organizations, and motivations of people that is the primary asset of modern organizations. This means a leader must accept and effectively deal with all kinds of people. If a leader is to be successful, she or he had better acknowledge this reality.

Diversity

Is promoting diversity necessary? Is it important? Certainly it would seem to be a valuable commodity.

What makes us different from one another? What is really so different about us? One obvious answer is "biology". Certainly any beginning biology class student knows that except for identical twins, no two people have the same genes. For all practical purposes it is legitimate to claim that each person is a unique, one-of-a-kind person.

Do we need to be reminded biology means little? Whether we are tall or short, blond/blue eyed or red-headed with green eyes, what is important is what we make of our biological endowments. So, in living and working together let us not focus on our biological differences.

Schein (1992) suggests culture is one of the ways groups preserve their integrity and autonomy; differentiates itself from its environment and other groups; and, provides for group identity. Our cultural world view is the result of "rubbing elbows with one segment of the human race" (Simons, 1989, p.5). Culture is our view of life and how we practice it (Simons, 1989). Many variables are factors in the mix that makes up one's culture. For example, family, life experiences, nationality, organizational memberships, profession, region and neighborhood where a person lives, sexual preference, and social class are a few of these variables.

The world is made up of millions of women and men, girls and boys with a variety of biological and cultural differences. Added to all this is each person's individually unique personal history. Thus, as Simons (1989) stresses, "When it comes to people, Different is normal" (p.6).

Just how does the leader deal with "differences" in the workplace? Researchers suggest adaptation is a process of communication (Harris & Morgan, 1991; Hecht, Anderson, & Ribeau, 1989; Kang & Pearce, 1983; J. Kim, 1980; Y. Kim, 1979, 1988, 1989; Ting-Toomey, 1988). However, little consensus has been reached among them with regard to communication variables or individual attributes which facilitate the process. Many labels have been used to describe the adaption process (e.g., acculturation, assimilation, amalgamation, transculturation, adaptation, etc.). It is these "communication variables" that effective leadership must address in order to succeed.

A question facing leaders is, "Do gender issues still need to be addressed?" The answer is, "Yes". Laws regarding equal opportunity, sexual harassment, and affirmative action address only flagrant abuses of fair treatment (Simons & Weissman, 1990). People are reluctant, or afraid, to complain; laws are costly to enforce and violations are difficult to prove (Arless, 1991). Leaders will continue to focus on this aspect of diversity as sex roles continue to evolve in the workplace and problems persist.

The necessary skills for success in business have changed as companies have downsized and eliminated layers of management. Promotions happen less frequently for both females and males. Working individually and competitively is being replaced by networking, teamwork, and effective communication with others.

Thus, leaders need to change their views of organizational communication. According to Buzzanell (1993), competitive individualism has tended to be the norm in corporate culture. However, we need to focus on cultivating a norm of cooperation. To be effective, leaders must examine how anti-female myths hinder women's corporate success (Faludi cited in Buzzanell, 1993) and recognize that unrealistic conceptions of beauty diminish women's independence and confidence in the workplace (Wolf cited in Buzzanell, 1993). Additionally, it is important for leaders to examine how they communicate issues such as reward systems, bases of social power, and the use of individual rather than group productivity rates when dealing with women and men in the workplace.

Unfortunately everyone is subject to prejudice. Therefore one group persecutes another group or rejects it on the basis that it is "inferior". The sad reality is that people too often "make facts" (Simons, 1989, p.14) out of opinions, feelings, and personal preferences. Too often we establish an absolute "truth" or "reality" and are unable to acknowledge that other possibilities exist.

Simons writes: The world consists of "us" and "them."
We are right, and they are wrong.
We are good, they are bad.
We are beautiful, they are ugly. (p.14)

Importance and Role of Communication

It has long been recognized that communication skills are critical elements in leaders' successes in dealing with followers because they allow "for the regulation of our own behavior as well as the behavior of others" (Hackman & Johnson, 1991, p.13). Communication skills are not only important to leaders, but to employees as well. The American Society of Personnel Administrators (cited in Hackman & Johnson, 1991, p.15) reported that interpersonal and human relations skills, oral communication skills, and written communication skills respectively were the top three most valuable skills in being able to perform a job successfully.

Maddux (1988) reports that research has confirmed a positive relationship between communication and (a) improved productivity, (b) better problem solving, (c) a reduction in grievances, (d) ideas for improvement in methodology, (e) improved working relationships, and (f) greater personal satisfaction. Research has shown the best leaders are good communicators when a leader demonstrates open communication, accepts others, and respects their opinions. This allows for a corresponding increase in the productivity by leader-follower relationships in the workplace.

Simons (1989) claims "culture lives in our language" (p.10). And, at the core of our interaction with diverse people is the leader's ability to communicate. Culture impacts what emphasis we place on words, pictures, sounds, and feelings. This influence is present every moment of our lives (consciously and subconsciously). These cultural differences show up in how we "talk" to ourselves about ourselves. It also shows up in how we "talk" about others. Here again there is a subtle, yet powerful, subconscious effect taking place in our minds. What tends to happen is that our "self-talk" causes an automatic or habitual reaction to the person and the situation. The reaction may be a feeling, but all too often it comes as an action. During interaction our communication behaviors accentuate the "differences" between us, rather than bringing us closer together.

Research concerning language suggests one's language determines how one thinks (Dodd, 1995; Littlejohn, 1992; Varner & Beamer, 1995). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has significantly contributed to our understanding the active role language and social context play in determining a person's perceptions and behaviors. Leaders who understand that people are subject to the impact of their particular language in their society are more likely to be tolerant of diverse others' speech habits.

We caution leaders to pay attention to how they employ language in the workplace. There are a number of problems associated with language usage. For example, too often leaders resort to "labeling". The individual manipulates language in an effort to create a personal "reality". Labeling others as "motivated," "lazy," "pigs," and so on is likely to degrade, demean, and dehumanize them. DeVito (1992) warns that viewing others in terms of a label rather than in terms of how they actually are implies that people's labels are more important than the people themselves.

Another problem associated with a leader's use of language is "assuming". Assuming refers to making judgments about a person and acting not on the basis of facts, but on your personal perceptions. Assumptions are subjective and influenced by the leader's past experiences. They may or may not be true.

"Stereotyping" is another potential language problem. It consists of putting others in a category wherein specific characteristics of each person are not recognized. Stereotyping causes people to close their mind to what may be important about each member of the group and results in a static view of an individual or group.

Thinking or talking about others in terms of extremes without allowing for the possibility that reality may lie somewhere in between is known as "polarization". Such communication behavior creates an "us" versus "them" mentality. This process of limiting individuals and groups limits choices to only two alternatives, thus effectively blinding the leader to many viable options for dealing with situations in the workplace.

"Bypassing" reflects a tendency to interact and fail to accurately convey the intended meanings or fail to share the same connection between words and their referents (DeVito, 1992; Gouran, Miller, & Wiethoff, 1992). Because words are assumed to have intrinsic meanings, and because meanings are in the people who use them, leaders have to be cognizant of the dangers of bypassing.

According to organizational communication theory, communication can flow in every direction within an organization. When leaders use "intimidating" communication behaviors it is likely such interaction will "chill" the flow of needed communication. DeVito warns against leaders using intimidation through raising one's voice, using ambiguous messages, and double-talk.

Upward communication between supervisors and subordinates can result in communication that is "manipulative" when it is intended give the source an unwarranted benefit or outcome. Treating each other with respect and equality can help promote a positive climate.

"Disconfirming" another by ignoring the person's presence is a social sin. That is, it is a communicative behavior that damages the relational dimension of human interaction. We contend that disagreeing with or even rejecting someone

is more respectful than denying the person or group's presence and, subsequently the contributions made by the person or group. Effective leadership will avoid this communication problem.

A leader's language use can empower or "demean" those being led. Racist and sexist language "puts down" individuals and groups in the class being talked about while restricting personal or group rights. Such communication behavior serves to destroy the idea of "diversity" and reflects an unwillingness to create unity through communication.

We have all met the "know-it-all" and realize it is necessary to deal with "certainty". Gibb (1961) suggests leaders replace certainty with a sense of "provisionalism". His suggestion is for people to acknowledge the existence of numerous possibilities in dealing with various situations in the workplace.

In summary, it is important for leaders to leave room to understand others. Leaders must be open-minded. They need to accept the possibility that their's is not the only way and that someone else's idea may be better than their own.

Not only is a leader's language use an important element of success, the overall pervasive importance of communication skills can be seen when we consider the several dimensions of communication that affects leaders and followers in the workplace. Research has consistently identified a number of "key" communication variables: (a) space, (b) touch/gestures, (c) clothing, (d) voice, (e) eye contact, (f) time, and (g) posture (Dodd, 1995; Hackman & Johnson, 1991; Klopff, 1991; Samovar & Porter, 1991a; Simons, 1989).

Let us not forget the importance of the other one-half of the communication process: listening. Effective leaders recognize the value of active listening in all type of situations in the workplace. Leaders who listen are better able to understand problems, sustain attention of others, retain more information, and improve their working relationships with all types of culturally diverse people (Bone, 1988).

Finally, remember Decker (1988) suggests that communication is a skill. He maintains it is learnable. It should be noted that communicating effectively is not always easy, but in the long run it pays off. He reminds us that we can and should apply effective communication skills "within an organization," "to customers or the public," and "in our personal life" (p.5). Our experience has led us to conclude that evaluations of leaders must focus on whether or not they are able to effectively communicate their thoughts to diverse individuals and groups.

Leadership

"Given today's rapid rate of organizational change, and the changing needs of people, it is important for those 'in charge' to reevaluate and modify their styles on a regular basis" (Maddux, 1988, p.6). He further contends that this is the only way a leader can continue to be effective. Also, he says people's styles within

organizations are shaped by each person's life experiences (culture) and their values.

In their tenth anniversary edition of The One Minute Manager, Blanchard and Johnson (1982) affirm that effective leadership occurs when the leader is able to manage themselves and others in the workplace so that everyone may profit from their presence. They also underscore the reality that leaders serve at the pleasure of those being led. Leaders should appreciate those working with them.

They write:

The One Minute Manager's symbol--a one minute readout from a modern digital watch--is intended to remind each of us to take a minute out of our day to look into the faces of the people we manage. AND TO REALIZE THAT THEY ARE OUR MOST IMPORTANT RESOURCES [emphasis added]. (1982, np)

The need for leaders that are competent, confident, and CARING is upheld by Bracey, Rosenblum, Sanford, and Trueblood (1990). They suggest developing leadership that: (a) can disagree without making others feel wrong, (b) hears and understand others, (c) can tell the truth with compassion, (d) are willing to look for other's loving intentions, rather than be suspicious, and (e) are able to acknowledge the "greatness" that is in each one of us regardless of cultural background. Perhaps DePree (1992) says it best when he writes "above all, leadership is a position of servanthood" (p. 220).

Strategies for Enhancing Leadership in Diverse Contexts

Newmark and Asante (1976) maintain interpersonal communication skills are essential for effective interactions among people. Due to the rapid technology advances of the 1990s, we advocate such skills are more needed today than ever before in our history. Certainly understanding the role of communication when working with individuals and groups of diverse backgrounds "will not only promote effective and meaningful interactions with those who are different, but will simultaneously enable a person to have a sound sense of self" (Newmark & Asante, 1976, p.1). Toward such a goal, we offer to leaders (and potential ones) ten communication guides to enhance their chances of success.

1. To ensure effective communication, present your message in a way the listener can understand it.
2. Often leaders deal with complex information. When sharing it with others use numerous analogies and examples.
3. Use repetition to reinforce "key" information.
4. Practice organizing your thoughts when communicating with others in the workplace (formally and informally).
5. Verify understanding; Do not be shy about asking the receiver to repeat back to you what you have said.

6. When listening it is vital to concentrate on who is talking and what is being said.
7. Especially when dealing with someone of a different cultural heritage, hold back making any judgments until the speaker has stopped.
8. As a listener you may want to periodically repeat or paraphrase what the speaker has been saying to you.
9. An effective listener will ask questions to clarify information.
10. Remember: Maintain eye contact with the other person (both sending and receiving messages will be enhanced).

Effective leaders can achieve immediate credibility through appropriate language usage. When a leader uses language that adapts to the needs, interests, knowledge, and expectations of others then a bond of trust can be readily established. Using appropriate language allows leaders to achieve their goals (Verderber, 1979).

To assist leaders in handling the diversity between women and men in the workplace, we suggest that leaders should keep in mind that there are sex differences in conversational and speaking styles. First, men talk more than women. This may cause women to withdraw from conversations or to talk to each other. Second, in mixed groups men interrupt more than women do. Women feel they are not allowed to express their ideas in their entirety. Men feel women contribute less and they do not benefit from having them on the team. Third, women tend to focus on a speaker. Men see them as uncritical listeners or as flirting; women view men as arrogant. Fourth, men tend to control conversation topics. Women feel bored or excluded; men lose opportunities to broaden their interests. In mixed discussions, women introduce more topics than do men. Such communication behaviors make men seem fixated on a few topics while women appear to lack focus. Fifth, when listening, women nod to show they are paying attention. Men may nod only when agreeing with the speaker. Men presume women's nods indicate agreement, which they may or may not. Women think men are not interested or not listening. Sixth, women use "powerless" language (e.g., filler words, qualifiers, tag questions, etc.) and men may miss the point being made or not take female communicators seriously. Women feel men do not value their contributions. Finally, some words are used almost exclusively by one gender and may not be understood by the other. It behooves leaders to make nonsexist language the norm in the workplace and choose words which are inclusive whenever possible.

At this point let us consider five broad leadership strategies to promote working together with individuals and groups in diverse environments. First, remember that you will always feel some uneasiness when interacting with someone whose background differs from your own.

Second, avoid dividing people around you into "friend" or "foe". The tendency to classify people and groups into "us" or "them" sets up an attitudinal wall of separation. If we allow this "wall" to exist, then it will always be a situation of "insiders" versus "outsiders". A lack of effective multicultural leadership

ultimately leads to a world filled with "haves" and "have nots". Diversity can lead to either creativity or conflict (Woyach, 1993), but the potential positive outcomes suggest we should seek it.

Third, as leaders we cannot afford to be complacent. If we are too comfortable in our routines it is likely we will not want to change our normal ways of thinking and behaving. The fact is the injustice of prejudicial acts toward those different from ourselves hurts everyone. Until we get out of our comfortable "shells" and explore the diversity in our surroundings, little will change in the world and social injustice will live and flourish.

Fourth, we must drive out fear. The more we can dialogue with diverse groups the better off we will be. It is fear that keeps us apart. Rather than live "in fear" of someone different from us or a group from another culture, seek to learn about the person or group. Leaders need to turn fear into curiosity (Simons, 1989).

Fifth, people misuse "names." That is, they use names inappropriately. It is a leaders responsibility to stand up and speak up when a group (or person) is called a disrespectful name. Anytime we allow ourselves or others to use demeaning terms, we not only hurt the object of our talk, but we also diminish ourselves.

Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of this paper was to present a strategy of effective leader communication behaviors to promote working together in diverse settings. To achieve this purpose we examined the following issues: (a) diversity, (b) importance and role of communication, (c) leadership, and (d) strategies for enhancing leadership in diverse contexts.

To maximize your leadership potential, you should remember when interacting with someone whose background differs from your own, avoid attitudinal walls of separation. Diversity can lead to potential positive outcomes. Remember as leaders we cannot afford the injustices of prejudicial acts toward those different from ourselves. We must dialogue with diverse groups rather than live "in fear" of someone different from us or a group from another culture.

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