

What Do Your Cross Cultural Followers Want?

By Deborah Jenks



When was the last time you took time to observe how your leadership style was affecting your followers from different cultures or lifestyles? Diversity is an ever increasing fact in our American culture. Diversity can be anyone who is perceived to be different. Most often it is age, gender, race, or ethnicity, but more subtle forms are intellectual, economical or social differences. We need to learn how to lead and encourage followers in the midst of diversity.

Diversity

Taylor Cox defines diversity as “the variation of social and cultural identities among people existing together in a defined employment or market setting.”ⁱ He further expounds that these affiliations include: gender, race, national origin, religion, age cohort, and work specialization among others. Geographic diversity includes local, regional, national, and global settings. Equal Employment Opportunity was a legal and enforced way to deal with differences. Diversity is a voluntary approach. But even as a voluntary initiative, it can create division or unity based on how it is implemented.

Today’s U.S. business environment is multi-cultural. Over a million immigrants arrive each year in the U.S. Most seek employment. A U.S. Department of Labor reportⁱⁱ states, “By 2050, the U.S. population is expected to increase by 50 percent and minority groups will make up nearly half of the population. Immigration will account for almost two-thirds of the nation’s population growth. The population of older Americans is expected to more than double. One-quarter of all Americans will be of Hispanic origin. Almost one in ten Americans will be of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. And more women and people with disabilities will be on the job.” The other factor is that businesses operate in an increasingly global economy.

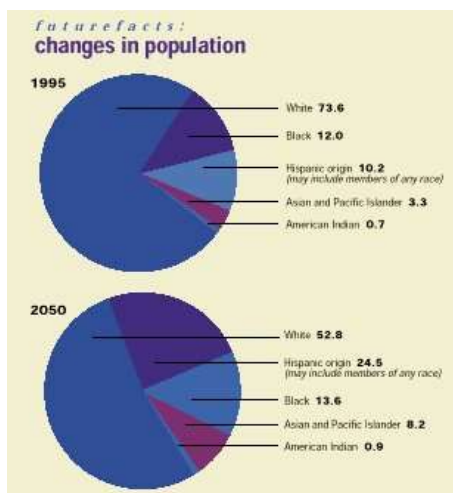


Figure 1: Changes in Race/Ethnicity from *Futurework: Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century*

Diversity will enable America to be staffed in the future. In contrast, Japan or European nations with shrinking populations will be challenged to staff jobs and finance an increasingly elderly population. The American challenge is to overcome culture shock to accommodate the diversity. Some Americans are comfortable only in our culture and if they travel believe everything “should be like America.” Whereas, other Americans welcome people from different cultures.

Typically culturally aware people are more tolerant of differences; therefore they make better team players. Exposure to many view points challenges people to think more creatively. Often cross-cultural people will think outside the box to solve problems more effectively than mono-cultural people. Each culture has its strengths; when brought together there is synergy.

Organizations will diversify as they understand that it will increase profits. According to McCuiston, some of the benefits are: "Improved bottom line, competitive advantage, superior business performance, employee satisfaction and loyalty, strengthened relationships with multicultural communities, and attracting the best and the brightest candidates."ⁱⁱⁱ A diverse set of employees can serve a wider number of clients. It is a win for clients who feel their unique needs are recognized and a win for employees who feel their unique talents are appreciated.

Organizations need to meet the inclusion expectations of their diverse followers (and clients) if they want to remain in business.

Followership

One definition of leadership is a person who has followers. According to Deiss, leaders and followers are in a symbiotic relationship.^{iv} However, in many cases the emphasis has been on the leader, leaving the follower perceived as "weak, passive, and unmotivated." Yet the work can not be performed without followers' active participation. Robert Kelley in *The Power of Followership* states that an effective follower has the following skills: "critical thinking, knowing oneself, understanding the needs and or qualities of the people around them."^v These are all skills needed in leaders. Leaders must overcome any follower prejudices.

Today's organizations are flatter and require groups of motivated and empowered workers to think creatively about solutions together. Leaders and followers often exchange positions as tasks necessitate different leadership skills. Therefore a good leader is also a good follower. As a result, more collegial relationships are required rather than hierarchical. Ira Chaleff stated, "Followers and leaders and followers both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader."^{vi} The important criterion is that the purpose is accomplished rather than who is the leader. Yet not everyone has been trained to be successful in this environment.

An additional factor that complicates the mix of leader and follower is the increasing diversity in the workplace. Fifty years ago business was dominated by white males, especially in leadership. As the Dept. of Labor study indicates, the composition of the workforce is changing drastically. Leadership needs to reflect this change in followership. One way to develop better followers and future leaders is to empower people at all levels in effective followership and leadership skills. Remember not everyone wants to be a leader.

Followers want to be appreciated, recognized for their contributions, as well as trained to be successful. So how do we encourage follower skills in the midst of diversity? The following are some areas we will examine to encourage followers in our workplaces.

- ❖ A Place at the Table
- ❖ Leadership Development
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Affinity Groups
- ❖ Work-Life Balance

A Place at the Table

Followers want a place at the adult table, so they are not relegated to the children's table. This is removing "class" distinctions. This means a full position with respect and equal access to resources. Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) was government initiated and driven by quotas. People who

received positions under this system often were not respected because they had “not earned” it. Diversity is voluntary and is about a company proactively developing people to operate successfully in a position. Followers want leaders who know their employees’ needs and demonstrate inclusion more openly.

A key to success is to understand the table is in a family setting. All must know the family rules, which means an organization must provide clear vision, mission, and values statements. The above strategy provides a framework for all leaders and followers to make decisions – rather than from personal preference.

Once the follower has the position, they want to be empowered by the organization and by themselves. The organization must release the resources to enable a person to perform the job. The person also must be confident that they are fully capable of doing the work. Not micro-managing is a common request. Mutual trust enables the follower to attempt new approaches.

To ensure people from diverse cultures are comfortable, the following organizational space factors “at the table” need to be considered: cleanliness of workspace, physical barriers separating people, and class distinctions between physical spaces.

Leadership Development

The face of leadership is changing in the next decade. Many top and middle leadership positions will turn over due to aging baby-boomer retirements. Increasingly leadership is shared amongst team members rather than by a single leader. However, leadership will need to reflect the growing diversity. Cross-cultural leaders are required to do business in other countries, as well as leading multi-cultural people in their own country. Therefore future leaders need to be developed from all the constituencies and future populations of an organization. Followers (and customers) want to see that an organization is working to ensure they will have leaders who represent their interests.

Followers desire to be trained to be successful in their current and future organizations. Developing a long term Learning Plan will define what skills need to be learned and allow the manager to provide growth experiences. Formal education should include technical and soft skills, like successful negotiation. It is useful for each person to understand their personality and how to interact with other personality types. Providing individualized mentoring by a non-supervisor will encourage a person to stretch into new areas. Leaders can help followers develop critical thinking skills by asking non-threatening questions. Everyone needs to be trained to be sensitive cross-culturally.

People practices that encourage diversity are: recruiting, promotion, compensation, awards, performance appraisal, job classification, and career development. These practices must be scrutinized to ensure fairness and diversity are considerations in all decisions. Followers want people processes, practices, and leaders that are credible.

Communication

Followers want an environment where their individuality is not just tolerated, but accepted. Communication opens doors to solutions. A Monitor case study^{vii} presents the case for open conversation about diversity issues. The issue of sexual harassment wasn’t understood by male leaders until a trusted woman peer openly discussed her extensive experiences with it. Another consultant recommended open conversations for people to reflect on their own beliefs, assumptions, and why they think they are right. Dialogue brings to the forefront prejudices and blind spots caused by an individual’s background and experiences. Once these are exposed, a person has a choice to change or not. Often this will be influenced by whether their view point is deemed acceptable in the organizational culture established by the leaders. Followers want leaders who actively listen and take appropriate action.

Followers don't want to be singled out for special treatment, but want a comfortable working environment. Once hidden values of individuals and the organization are revealed, then remedial solutions need to be established. If solutions are not built, then employees who do not feel welcome will turnover. The company loses trained employees as a result. For example, a discussion or training session on sexual harassment can be expanded to professional courtesy which is how to treat all employees with respect.

Affinity Groups

One of the characteristics of being a minority is feeling like one is outside of the mainstream. Networking is the exchange of information or services between individuals or groups. Affinity Groups establish networking amongst people with a common characteristic such as gender, race, or ethnicity. They are able to discuss personal feelings, experiences, likes, and dislikes with similar people. Collaboration and trust can be established in an open environment as they thrash out concerns, opportunities, and strategies. Perhaps most important, followers desire to know they are not alone which can bring more confidence in their daily interactions.

Followers want to know they are being heard. As a cohort, affinity groups can present their needs and wants to the organization to request change. A learning organization will evaluate the requests from multiple affinity groups to decide which policies or practices need to be established or changed. For example, mentoring programs have been introduced to train and encourage high-potential minority followers.

Lou Gerstner transformed the IBM culture by introducing affinity groups to signal that diversity was a strategic goal.^{viii} Affinity groups were established with an executive sponsor who was different to increase cross-cultural understanding. For example, a woman executive sponsored the white male group. Company time was dedicated over six months to address the needs of the constituency and how IBM could address high impact issues. Much of the success of the program was attributed to the personal interest and involvement of the CEO. Managers were measured on their diversity skills to enforce the importance of this initiative. An additional benefit of affinity groups is providing deeper insights into customers and markets of that affinity group.

Work-Life Balance

Workers for individual reasons are requiring more work-life balance. Two earner families must trade-off child care responsibilities. Various cultures and religions have different Sabbaths and holidays that require religious presence or family celebrations. Global companies may require employees to take conference calls late at night or early in the morning for voice to voice communication.

Some company policies to be reviewed are: Length of the typical workday, days of work per week, overtime, time-off policies (vacation, leave, and personal days), retirement policies, and schedule flexibility. More liberal time off policies will attract, retain, and motivate more followers.

Followers want leaders who walk the talk in this area. A leader who gives permission for a follower to attend a child's school program instead of a key meeting earns many points in a follower's eyes.

References:

ⁱ Taylor Cox, Jr. *Creating the Multicultural Organization, A Strategy for Capturing the Power of Diversity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 3.

ⁱⁱ Department of Labor, Futurework: *Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century*.
<http://dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/herman/reports/futurework/execsum.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Velma E. McCuiston, Barbara Ross Wooldridge, and Chris K. Pierce, "Leading the Diverse Workforce, Profit, Prospects, and Progress," *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal* 25, no, 1 (2004 [journal on-line]); available from Emerald Journals, accessed on 04 July 2006, 74.

^{iv} Kathryn J. Deiss and Maureen Sullivan "The Shared Leadership Principle: Creating Leaders Throughout the Organization" *Leading Ideas*, 7 (1996) [on-line website];
<http://www.arl.org/diversity/leading/issue2/shared.html>

^v Robert E. Kelley, *The Power of an Effective Follower* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 9 in Deiss.

^{vi} Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower: Standing up to and for our Leaders* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995), 14 in Deiss.

^{vii} Sarah B. Gant, "Monitor Company: Personal leadership on Diversity," *Harvard Business Publishing* (1994, revised March 15, 1995) Reprint 9-395-049.

^{viii} David A. Thomas, "Diversity as Strategy," *Harvard Business Review* (September 2004) Reprint R0409G.

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