Diversity can lead to conflict, or respect

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Difference in the workplace often creates misunderstandings that give rise to conflict, but with the right management approach, difference can lead to respect, says Macquarie University professor of management Lucy Taksa.

Employers should recognise the fact that difference is difficult and creates issues between workers that need to be resolved, she says.

Without proper training, it's all too easy for a well-meaning manager to make matters worse instead of better when responding to difference.

The difficulty in equipping managers to deal with difference is that there's no one-size-fits-all approach.

"Somebody who has a different source of identity, whether it's sexuality or culture, even gender, may keep silent in order not to draw attention to their difference. [Or] they may adapt to the norms of the dominant group in order to fit in."

Similarly, some people don't wear religious garments or symbols because they don't want to draw attention to their faith, but others believe it's crucial to their identity.

"There's a variability in the way people respond to difference... and that really makes it difficult for a manager.

"Sometimes it leads to conflict, sometimes it doesn't - sometimes it leads to respect, and I think managers need to develop their skills to respect difference."

Do your managers have the necessary skills?

One of the most critical management skills for dealing with difference and fostering diversity is that of active listening, Taksa says.
"All managers, from first line up, need to have mediation training, because one of the really important elements of mediation training is active listening."

This is a critical skill, because managers who don't listen well won't mediate well.

Training should also teach managers different strategies for accommodating difference in the workplace, Taksa says.

"I think there are certain practices that should be accommodated - whether it's a prayer room or the capacity not to work on the Sabbath - there's got to be a flexibility to enable people sufficient scope to practise their differences."

Recognising and celebrating a cultural or religious festival outside the dominant culture, and giving people an opportunity to celebrate and explain their different practices - or simply "tell their stories" - can make the different more familiar, she says.

"And the more familiar [differences] are, the less conflict you're going to have [because] there's understanding."

Managers also need training in intangible soft skills like building rapport and creating a trusting environment where people don't feel the need to conceal their differences, Taksa says.

All the while, managers must be mindful that there are multiple types of difference, which can intersect.

"There needs to be a sensitivity to those choices that individuals make, and an effort not to make stereotypical assumptions.

"We often talk about diversity in terms of women, cultural background or race, religion, age, ability/disability, sexuality and so on, as if they are unitary characteristics. But of course, they're not. A woman can also be gay, or she can come from a culturally distinct non-English speaking background, which will affect her communication style, so there are multiple levels of oppression and potential discrimination that might occur," she says.

"In the dominant Anglo culture, we tend to leave spaces between each other's statements as a sign of respect and that we're concentrating and listening to the person. But if people come from an Eastern European background, the less space the better - the more engagement. So you'll often find people from Eastern and Southern Europe sound like they're arguing and interrupting each other... but they're norms within the culture."

Because managers can encounter any number of differences in the workplace, they must be capable of being flexible and reflective. Unhappy, disengaged, or self-censoring workers should send warning signs that difference might be causing tension.

They then need to look beyond cultural and gendered norms, see whether there's an issue, and respond with sensitivity, focusing not on generalisations and stereotypes but the individual's specific circumstances and needs, Taksa says.

Managers are people too

It's vital that managers remember they too are "different", she adds.

"Often we think, 'Everyone's diverse except the Anglo-Australians', when in fact they have an identity as well, and that needs to be addressed. Nobody is without identity difference [so] it's important that managers become aware of their own sources of identity."

It follows that diversity training should not only make managers aware of prevailing stereotypes and assumptions, but allow them to identify and address their own preconceptions.

Because managers must work within systems, they can sometimes be viewed as merely part of those systems. But managers need support too, says Taksa, who recommends giving them the opportunity to "debrief with each other on the handling of differences, so they're not isolated in their handling of diversity issues".

"I think it's healthy for people to be able to verbalise or articulate their tensions and frustrations and dealing with difference and diversity is difficult. We have to recognise it's one of the most difficult things in the world... so I think it's important for people to be able to voice their concerns."

Failure to address diversity issues can lead to a loss of talent and an increased risk of bullying and discrimination cases - not to mention low morale, Taksa warns.

"Sometimes initiatives can cost money, and if there's no direct bottom-line evidence that it's going to make money people don't want to buy into it, but that's a very short-term perspective.

"What HR managers need to do is to identify the long-term perspective and to illustrate the long-term cost of not doing things to create a tolerant and accepting environment," she says.