

Making Ethnic Differences Count at the Workplace: A New Paradigm Shift for Managing Diversity in Ghana

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Abstract

The article examined issues of ethnicity and how it affects workplace internal cohesion and its impact on performance in Ghana. The main objective of the article was to discuss the impact of workplace diversity and its implications on performance. It also examines the benefits and challenges of issues of ethnic diversity and explain how talents could be harnessed from employees from different ethnic background to achieve the goals of an organization. The article revealed that ethnic diversity is prevalent in many organizations in Ghana. This to a larger extent has affected performance and hence productivity in some organisations. The study finally draws attention to the harmful effects of ethnic diversity on performance and indeed productivity and concluded by examining what could be done to reduce issues of ethnic diversity at the workplace in Ghana.

Keywords: Stereotyping, Ethnocentrism, Personality Clashes, Effective Organizational Performance, Productivity.

1. Introduction

There is beauty in diversity. Human beings have different personality traits and cannot be and will not be homogeneous not even identical twins. According to Mullins (2010) individual differences is an essential feature of diversity. The fundamental concept of diversity explains that the workplace consists of diverse population of employees of visible and non-visible differences that gives an organization its unique nature. Since people are not the same in terms of ethnicity, personality, values, beliefs, attitudes, social and educational background, it becomes very challenging to accommodate and co-operate with all manner of employees to attain the corporate goal and vision of an organization. The beauty of diversity is founded on the belief that harnessing these differences will create a productive work environment in which employees will feel valued and respected (Mullins, 2010). This presupposes that talents will fully be utilized and organization goals will be attained as a result of the cohesion that exists in the workplace.

Ghana is made up of people from many ethnic backgrounds with different values and beliefs systems. These value systems naturally may influence how people behave especially outside their environment with social benefit or social cost. The ultimate outcome may include social perception; ethnocentrism; prejudice and bias which have the potential of causing dissatisfaction at the workplace. This ultimately affects interpersonal relationship or creates strain relations which eventually affect performance and productivity. The multi-million dollar question that should engage our thought process is should our ethnic differences divide us as a people? Ethnocentric diversity issues are sensitive and must be professionally handled to create harmonious relationship at the workplace. In the words of Madiba (Nelson Mandela), "people must learn to treat each other with dignity and respect; fairness; equality and justice irrespective of our ethnic background. Ubuntu is a term in the Zulu language in South Africa which means seeing ourselves as one people. This is what should be demonstrated at the workplace; the overall effect is workplace internal cohesion, co-operation, and collaboration and thus increased in performance and productivity. It is worth mentioning that irrespective of the beauty of diversity and its positive effect of improving talents and capabilities to increase growth and productivity, the issue of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and bias will always surface in organizations no matter how hard we lay it to rest. It is this challenge that this article seeks to address. The objective of this article is to review and reach a better understanding of the impacts of ethnic diversity on performance. The article seeks to find answers to the impact of ethnic diversity and its implication on workplace performance. The paper reviews the theoretical foundations of ethnic diversity, benefits and challenges and its impact on workplace performance and finally lessons on how to manage ethnic workplace diversity.

1.1 Theoretical foundation of ethnic workplace diversity

People with different ethnic differences working in an organization makes diverse workforce and it is absolutely critical that the organizations know about these differences and how to manage it. Individual differences are the basis of diversity. "The basic concept of managing diversity accepts that the workplace consists of a diverse population of people. The diversity consists of visible and non-visible differences which will include sex, age, background, race disability, personality and workstyle. It is founded on the premise that harnessing these differences will create a productive environment in which everybody feels valued, where their talents are being fully utilized, and in which organizational goals are met" (Mullins, 2010). Clearly, appreciating the multiplicity of differences that exist among people could change the workplace into an environment where employees see

themselves as one people with a common destiny. When there is harmony in the workplace, it could create a productive workforce where different talents from different background could be brought together to achieve the set objectives of an organization.

Diversity is increasingly becoming a critical issue in every organization irrespective of the core business of the organization. Interestingly the success of any individual, be it the chief executive officer, middle level management, corporate executive assistants and customer- service professional, will increasingly depend on their ability to function in a culturally diverse marketplace. Business Organizations the world over have come to the realization of the need of a diverse workforce and that each employee of the workforce must truly embrace the principles of diversity to realize the longevity, growth, and increased profits (Daft, 2008). It is now time for people to understand and embrace ethnic diversity as a way of moving society forward. Our background is non issue but what matter or count is the menu of ideas that we harness for changed workplace productivity. When we understand and accept differences, the impact is significant to the workplace, increased in excellent interpersonal relationship; excellent communication; brotherliness; concern for one another; openness; and increase in productivity. The outcome of ethnic diversity if not addressed would result in divisiveness; perception; stereotyping; and ethnocentrism which affect the very purpose of organization. It increases mistrust; increase tension and personality clashes which ultimately affect the internal cohesion needed for growth and productivity. This presupposes that the organization will fail to meet its bottom-line which may result in employees lay- offs with its economic and social implications for the workplace and the country at large.

“We all inhabit this small planet, we all breath the same air, we all cherish our children’s future, and we are all mortal” (John Kennedy 1965; cited in Mullins 2010). Clearly, we are all the same people and our background should not divide us as a people. Mullins argues that appreciating cultural differences may be of intrinsic value. The advantages of cross-cultural awareness include; self-awareness (understanding ourselves); sensitivity to differences; questioning what we know vis-a-vis the knowledge of others; and lessening ignorance, prejudice and hatred which have the potential to promote healthy relationship at work. This means cooperation and collaborating at the workplace will increase trust, excellent interpersonal relationship; knowledge sharing; and networking which could make significant difference at the workplace. This clearly shows that our ethnic differences should rather bring us together since the social benefits far outweigh the social cost. There is a perception among Ghanaians that Akans in Ghana are extraverts with good interpersonal relationship and good networking skills; people of Northern Ghana acclaimed to be very honest; coupled with Ewes from the Volta Region who are meticulous and hardworking, the resultant effect will be increased performance and thus increased in productivity. Mullins (2010) however points out that it would be wrong to think that increased cross-cultural awareness will automatically bring about any of the stated outcomes. (Mullins; 2010) explains that there are some inbuilt dangers when multicultural teams operate in a business setting; mistrust including stereotyping; miscommunication with potential for reduced accuracy and resultant stress; process difficulties- that is failure to agree when agreement is needed or even what constitutes agreement when arriving at decisions. Kreitner and Kinicki (2009) argue that stereotyping can lead to poor business decisions; can undermine loyalty and job satisfaction. The ramification is low commitment; absenteeism; tardiness and high turnover rate which eventually affect the organization bottomline. (White, 1999) argues that when ethnic diversity increases labour turnover and absenteeism in organizations which have far reaching cost implications for the organization. He emphasized that this could affect employee job satisfaction and productivity and ultimately on profitability. when this happens the organization tends to lose. this is the more reason why management should nip in the back issues of ethnic diversity.

In Ghana, issues of ethnic diversity are not pronounced but exist at the workplace. People instinctively or naturally follow issues of ethnic diversity either identifying with people from the same background with them. Ethnocentric tendencies are displayed even by top level executives without realizing the implications to the individual self-esteem and relationship with others. This attitude can affect morale; create tension; and counterproductive work attitude like mistrust; miscommunication; and work related stress. Besides, stereotyping has taken a firm root in Ghana. There is a perception that Akans for instances are boastful and very sensitive to issues related to money. People hold a strong belief that an Akan will go in for money and throw values; honesty; integrity; and good moral principles to the dogs. There is an old adage in Akan which to some extent supports this assertion “will good moral principles bring food to the table”. The stereotyping of Akans is widely held by majority of the people in Ghana to some extent lack substance; misplaced; and without foundation. This is because we have people from other background who are equally money conscious in Ghana. Besides, we have many Akans who cherish honesty; integrity; and will uphold moral principles in the face of adversity. It is therefore not proper to conclude that most Akans are boastful and money conscious. It is a fact that cannot be disputed that Akans are hardworking; persistent; determined and very ambitious people and that the fear of failure inspires them to go the extra mile to succeed. Even if that is a weakness, as people we should rather harness our potentials and support each other to make the workplace a haven to attain individual as well as organizational goals. A friend jokily indicated that he will not give the position of an Accountant to an Akan

because the implications are very grievous to an organisation. This amounts to stereotyping and does not augur well for national unity and cohesion.

Adler (2002 cited in Mullins, 2010) examines a study on the success of multicultural work teams and concluded that the evidence suggests that they either perform much better or much worse than teams composed of one cultural group. Clearly, there are risks as well as benefits in working with across cultures.

I was a star witness to a case in an organization in Ghana where a project team was remunerated after a consultancy. The head of project the team shared the money accrued to the team on ethnic lines. People were remunerated not according to their performance; but sadly and regrettably on ethnic lines.

The principle of fairness and equity were violated which had a serious repercussion on performance and relationship. This resulted in bitterness; tension; personality clashes and resentment. The issue was finally resolved in close doors. It is significant to note that harness talents from diverse background for effective work performance can create dissatisfaction; tension; tardiness; low commitment; miscommunication and mistrust; and high turnover rates.

1.2 Benefits of ethnic diversity

Commitment to ethnic diversity starts at the top. Success in workforce diversity begins with visible commitment by organizational leadership. According to (Hayes, 1999; Jackson et al., 1992) organisations can succeed at ethnic diversity if the initiative to create, manage and value the diverse workforce has the full support of the top management. Hayes (1999) explains that diversity helps businesses to creating a larger talent pool, helping organizations to attract and retain the best available talents, which make firms more competitive. An ethnic diverse workforce better serves a diverse customer base, and offers better insights into customer need (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2009). Clearly, an ethnic diverse workforce possesses more innovative ideas, creative approaches and diverse strategies for dealing with organizational issues which ultimately meet its bottomline. An ethnic diverse workforce offers new solutions, expanded critical analysis and higher quality decisions; and more divergent thinking. Accommodating ethnic diversity makes the organization more adaptable to other organizational issues (Hayes (1999). Our world has become a complex unit which requires more divergent thinking. Managers can only make a greater impact if they begin to develop a global mindset involving open mindedness; adaptability, and a strong desire to learn through collaboration and co-cooperativeness.

1.3 Challenges and implications to managing workplace Ethnic diversity

According to Kreitner and Kinicki (2009), diversity represents the multitude of individual differences and similarities that exist among people. They point out that diversity pertains to the host of individual differences that make all of us unique and different from others. "Managing ethnic diversity will enable people to perform up to their maximum potential" (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2009). It is expected that organizations will take issues of diversity serious considering its impact on performance; commitment; job satisfaction; and productivity. In the 21st century, smart organizations which want to remain competitive in a turbulent business environment strive for greater ethnic diversity in their workforce. Evidence of research finding from University of Florida however indicated that, ethnic diversity also creates potential issues in the workplace, which a prudent employer needs to understand if he hopes to support a diverse workplace.

1.3.1 Ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is the feeling that one's own cultural beliefs and norms are superior to others or more appropriate than the beliefs and norms of another culture. An ethnocentric viewpoint examines issues from ethnic lens, a culture that accepts only one way of doing things based on one cultural beliefs and values. This leads to the belief that people who are different from us are somehow deficient, incompetent and may produce below expectation. Ethnocentrism manifests itself in opposing behaviour that is inconsistent to others. This clearly threatens the smooth functioning of the organization and that people who complain about perceived weaknesses could be tagged as oversensitive (Kreitner, and Kinicki 2009). These assumptions and inaccurate stereotypes hinder efforts to take advantage of unique talents and abilities of others (Bryan 2008). The question that intelligent minds should be asking is, if one perceives its culture and norms to be superior to others, should that divide us as a people? When peoples' emotions are affected as a result of how they are treated stress set in with its associated health implications. This ultimately affect performance and hence productivity which eventually increase the social and economic costs of business operations. The bottom-line should be harnessing the various talents across board; collaborating and co-operating; and tolerating one another because of our unique differences by virtue of our ethnic background to ensure that the vision of the organization is achieved. What is most significant is that civilization got to some group of people earlier than others. People learn through their interaction with other people; and in some cases review some practices to suit current trends. Clearly all humans did not start from the same level playing field in terms of civilisation. It is therefore appropriate to de-emphasis our differences in the light of our background and look beyond the present to see how we can make our workplace a haven; a place where people will be accepted; willing to share knowledge; and be committed to

achieving their self-actualisation needs and most importantly the goals of their organizations.

1.3.2 Miscommunication

Most employers and employees alike often times fail to communicate their thought process effectively. This is mainly attributable to ones educational and ethnic background. Mullins (2010) argues that an ethnic diverse workplace often means that employees communicate without considering the repercussion of what they say. This can result in confusion or even insults between employees who are not accustomed to each other's customs and traditions. In a study, conducted in a banking institution in Ghana, a manager confronted a subordinate for speaking her dilate. An employee may make a statement which could be misrepresented on the basis of his background. It is therefore critical that employers and employees alike promote an atmosphere of clarity and openness where perceived miscommunication can be explained.

1.3.2 Inaccurate Stereotypes and prejudice

As much as people may wish otherwise, stereotypes and preconceived notions about those who are different from them by virtue of their background will continue to exist in the workplace. Inaccurate stereotype and prejudice manifest or show up in the belief that differences are seen as weaknesses which clearly means sacrificing competence and quality (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2009). These perceptions and prejudice can have significant spillover effect in a diverse workplace and may accordingly create tension; clashes; confusion; dissatisfaction. The outcome or the resultant effect could be losing talents; the organization becoming less competitive; losing out the benefits that come with people from different ethnic background. The overall effect is slow productivity; losing business; and thus the organizations bottomline.

1.4 Best practices in managing workplace diversity

Work teams naturally consist of employees from diverse ethnic background and are expected to strive for greater co-operation, better communication, and less conflict. In Ghana, issues of ethnic diversity most often surface at the workplace but are less pronounced because of its adverse implications. Effectively managing ethnic diversity requires organizations to adopt a new mindset of thinking about differences among people. Managing diversity entails recognition of the unique contribution every employee can make (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2009). They contend that greater co-operation and successful collaboration can be achieved through modeling collaborative behaviour where executive demonstrate highly collaborative behaviour. Because of the sensitivity of ethnic diversity issues at the workplace, management can take the first step to explain the need for collaboration and co-operation; and respect of the dignity of people. According to (Hayes, 1999; Jackson et al., 1992) organisations can succeed at diversity if the initiative to create, manage and value the diverse workforce has the full support of the top management. This initiative will sensitise employees of the need to value and respect the dignity of others who are uniquely different. Again executive could create an avenue for mentoring and coaching especially on an informal basis to help people build the networks that are needed at the workplace. (Bagshaw, 2004) contends that it is possible that the HR department can capitalize on existing diversity within the organization and organized training programmes to include both senior and line managers on ethnic diversity as well as employees from different functions and departments to teach employees how to build healthy relationships at work, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts creatively and amicably. HR departments can inculcate ethnic diversity in the recruitment, selection, succession management and performance management and rewards decisions (Casio, 1998). The effect could be demonstration of the fact that the organization as a culture that value individual differences and value the dignity of people irrespective of the ethnic background. This can have a major impact on team collaboration; supporting a strong sense of unity where employees are more comfortable reaching out to colleagues and more likely to sharing knowledge; and giving responsibilities to team leaders that are both tasks and relationship-oriented. Kreitner and Kinicki (2009) were of the view that employees may feel reluctant to share knowledge if most team members are strangers and as much as possible it is proper and expedient to blend employees from different ethnic background who know one another on the team to add colour to group activities.

2. Methodology and Procedure

Making ethnic diversity count involved the use of secondary materials; library research which consists of newspaper publications, textbooks, online publications, journals, and reports were used in the study. In other to solicit the required data for analysis, an interview guide used to elicit data from employees both in the public and private sectors in Accra. The rationale is to identify whether issues of ethnic diversity exist in their workplaces, benefits and impacts on performance. The rest of the paper is organized as follows; examination of the theoretical foundations of ethnic diversity; the benefits and challenges and implications of ethnic diversity; and finally best practices that could be adopted to manage ethnic diversity.

3. Discussions

It is great to see people from diverse ethnic background working together as a team. Undoubtedly there is beauty diversity to find diverse talents of people from different ethnic background. The study shows that most

people work comfortably with other people from other ethnic background. But they feel more comfortable working with people from their ethnic background. Mullins (2010) conducted a study on multicultural work teams and concluded that multicultural groups either perform much better or much worse than teams composed of one cultural group. Clearly, there are risks as well as benefits in working with across cultures. What is significant at the workplace is harnessing the strengths of people from different ethnic background to achieve the set goals of the organization. For example, people from Volta Region of Ghana are hard working, ready to learn new ways of doing things but usually prefer to work alone; the people of Akan background are smart, intelligent, good at networking and outspoken; and the people from Northern Ghana are reliable and very honest for their integrity. An organization can rely on all these talents to turn the fortunes of the business to its advantage which eventually increase the profitability. Managing ethnic diversity will enable people to perform up to their maximum potential (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2009).

The issues of diversity in the workplace are very sensitive and difficult to eradicate completely from academic literature. Some employees indicated that they become highly offended when derogatory statements are made about their ethnic background. This statement is consistent with Mullins (2010) assertion that issues of ethnocentrism are critical issues that can create disaffection in the workplace and can break the internal cohesion of an organization. The impact of excluding employees on ethnic lines may create workplace tension; mistrust; ethnic clashes, personality conflict and disunity in the workplace. The resultant effect would be breakdown in the internal cohesion of the organization which eventually affects performance leading to low productivity and thus the achievement of organisational goals. According to (Bryan, 2008) business organizations must truly embrace the principles of ethnic diversity to realize the longevity, growth, and increased profitability. Ignoring ethnic diversity issues have social and economic implications for an organization. Some of the consequences can include unhealthy tensions; loss of productivity because of increased conflict; inability to attract and retain talented people of all kinds; complaints and legal actions; and inability to retain valuable employees, resulting in lost investments in recruitment and training Mullins (2010). What we need at the workplace is total harmony; unity; collaboration and co-operation; bearing in mind our unique individual differences. Undoubtedly, we cannot make it alone; we need the support and opinion of others to fine tune our mindset to meet global acceptance. Society turns to gain more when we accept and work with people who are different from us without prejudice. Heterogeneity promotes creativity and innovation which diversity experts have shown to produce better solutions to problems and a higher level of critical analysis. The study tries to find out some benefits of working with people from diverse ethnic background. The response was so overwhelming. Many respondents indicated that there was internal cohesion at the workplace which promoted brotherliness. Mullins (2010) agrees that harnessing different talents from diverse ethnic background will create a productive environment in which everybody feels valued; where their talents are being fully utilized; and in which organizational goals are met. Clearly, appreciating the multiplicity of differences that exist among people could change the workplace into an environment where employees see themselves as one people with a common destiny. Globalization has introduced competition in business. Operating in a turbulent business environment requires harnessing various talents; and having a global mindset to learn which can find effective solutions to business challenges (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2009). This is critical at the time when businesses are undergoing tremendous changes and self-examination to find new and more effective ways to operate. With effective management of ethnic diversity, a business organisation develops a reputation as an employer of choice; not only with the ability to attract the best talents but critical for saving time and money in recruitment and turnover costs. (Bryan, 1999) points out that ethnic diversity will require a type of organisational culture in which what matters is performance to achieve career aspirations and not where an individual employee hails from. he further explains that a diverse groups tend to be more creative than homogenous groups, in part because people with diverse ethnic backgrounds bring different perspectives to problem solving. This confirms the beauty of ethnic diversity and its positive impact to an organization. Organizations should put premium on performance in the form of “we hire for performance” not where one hails from. On the issue of managing ethnic diversity at the workplace, respondents recommended mentoring programmes; encouraging excellent interpersonal relationships at the workplace; and management leading the way of demonstrating the need to collaborate and co-operate to work as a team irrespective of one’s ethnic background. Sadri and Tran, 2002 agree with these empirical findings that management should find enough people to serve as mentors. This would assist employees of diverse ethnic background to assimilate into the organisational culture and change any inaccurate stereotypes and ethnocentrism. According to them this process can become a win-win situation if mentors are strongly encouraged. Kreitner and Kinicki support the idea that interaction with co-workers from diverse ethnic background provides employees with an exposure that they might not experience if they were not employed with the organization. Ethnic diversity can enlighten employees and encourage them to look for alternative ways of developing interpersonal relationships and understanding communication differences among colleagues.

4. Conclusion

Organizations cannot ignore ethnic workplace diversity issues. A culturally diverse workforce, if not effectively managed, can create serious problems for an organisation. When employees are not well treated mainly because of their background, it has serious financial and social costs implications to the organization. The impact of ethnic diversity can caused high turnover rates, absenteeism, tardiness and lawsuits which in the long term reduce individual and organizational productivity. It could also have a negative repercussion of tarnishing the corporate image of an organization. Effective management of ethnic diversity give an urge to an organization in terms of building successful collaboration and co-operation which enhances creativity and practical problem solving. What is mainly needed at the workplace is understanding; co-operation and collaboration to achieve corporate goals. It is therefore significant that there is total respect for one another, fellow feeling, fairness and equity at the workplace devoid of ethnicity to promote effective organisational performance. our emphasis should always be on performance and productivity and not the ethnic background of employees.

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