



Time for a change: managing cross-cultural issues in Barbados – TEACHING NOTE

Questions for discussion

1. What are the issues from the perspective of
 - a. Vinette
 - b. Komo
 - c. The staff
2. What can be learned about factors that inhibit and promote organisational change?
3. What factors need to be taken into consideration in fostering individual change and minimising resistance to change?
4. In a globalised world where people are moving across cultures, how does an organisation foster appreciation of differences?
5. What were the gender dynamics in the case?
 - a. How did these affect the attitudes of the various individuals?
 - b. How did these impact on the operations of the company?
6. What processes are required to support the adaptation of international staff into different cultural settings?
7. In a cross-cultural or multi-cultural situation, how should managers approach differences and conflicts?

What advice would you give to Vinette?

This teaching note was written by Norma Shorey-Bryan with supervision from Dr Richard Norman from Victoria University of Wellington at the Caribbean Case Course in Barbados, July 2004. It has been prepared to support class discussion of the case 2004-53.1 and its epilogue 2004-53.2. The use and circulation of teaching notes is restricted to accredited academics or other approved users. The names of the company and of the individuals concerned have been changed to protect the privacy of all.

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Key educational concepts to which the case relates

- Facilitating organisational change and renewal: personal and interpersonal dynamics
- Dealing with challenges and conflict in a multi-cultural organisational setting
- Managing gender roles and dynamics in organisations
- Managing the career development of senior managers.

1. Issues from the perspectives of

Vinette

Vinette recognises that Komo needs support to adapt to a different cultural environment and norms. She has spoken to him and is sensitive to the fact that he has reacted negatively to her suggestions. She recognises that he needs to have other perspectives and feedback from a trusted source about his behaviour.

After having achieved a level of stability in the office, Vinette is concerned about the negative impact Komo's leadership style and approach are having on the morale of the office and the level of productivity of staff. She wants to ensure that productivity is increased while addressing the concerns of staff.

Komo

Komo saw staff opposition to him as personal, without understanding the broader cultural issues. This has made him more resistant to suggestions for change. He is convinced that the staff are incompetent and he is determined to "whip them into shape" by not compromising on standards of performance.

The staff

The staff feel that Komo does not understand, nor does he wish to understand their culture and is deliberately trying to undermine what they do. Sonia is frustrated by Komo's seeming inability to appreciate what is appropriate in the Caribbean context. Other staff members are sympathetic to Sonia and her struggle to deal with Komo.

2. What can be learned from the case about factors that inhibit and promote organisational change?

It is important to recognise that each organisation is unique and that external and internal forces for change must be examined in their specific context. In this case the survival of the organisation requires that it become more effective and efficient. What Vinette recognises and Komo does not, is that the staff has been demoralised by events of the past. They need to be encouraged and become motivated to deal with things differently and effectively. Building trust is an important aspect of motivation for changing behaviour.

Recommended reading

Mullins, Chapter 22, (*Organisational Development - Culture, Conflict and Change*).

Robbins, Chapter 18, (*Organisational Change and Stress Management*).

3. What factors need to be taken into consideration in fostering individual change and minimising resistance to change?

Developing trust and building security at the individual level is one of the building blocks for individual change. Individuals need to understand reasons for change and the benefits that can accrue to them. Vinette handled this well and she communicated effectively and engendered the trust of staff in her integrity and her commitment to do what she could for their benefit. In addition, by involving staff in the restructuring and change process, she gained their support and “buy-in”.

As a manager, Komo lacked human management skills. His inability to communicate effectively and sensitively compromised his interaction with staff and reduced his potential to encourage change. While he might be commended for his high standards and commitment to doing a good job, his bureaucratic approach engendered stiff resistance which was counterproductive to achieving his goals.

4. In a globalised world where people are moving across cultures, how does an organisation foster appreciation of differences?

In a global environment, interaction between persons from different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, age and gender is inevitable. In addition, workforce diversity (the increasing heterogeneity of organisations with the inclusion of different groups) is a reality for global companies.

Cross-cultural training, exploration of cultural differences in formal and informal settings, as well as social activities, help to build openness to differences in a non-threatening environment. Managers also need to create opportunities for persons from different cultures to sit back from conflict situations to assess the sources of conflict, including personality and culture, and then to come to a recognition that there are different ways of achieving objectives.

Recommended reading

Mullins, Chapter 9 (*Individual Differences*), Chapter 22 (*Organisational Development, Culture, Conflict and Change*).

Robbins, Chapter 13, (*Conflict and negotiation*).

5. What were the gender dynamics in the case?

- a. How did these affect the attitudes of the various individuals?
- b. How did these impact on the operations of the company?

Gender conflict stems from different expectations of gender roles. When compounded by gender expectations in different cultures, significant dissonances can be created. While some of the conflict can be explained by personality, some comes from gender/cultural dynamics, which impact on the ways that work is approached and undertaken.

GNS Barbados was a predominantly female organisation. Komo's entry as a male from a different culture was made difficult not only because of his cultural background but also because of his perception of gender roles. The assertive female professionals with whom he had to work resented his autocratic style. Actions and attitudes that might have been acceptable in his own culture created conflict. His expectations of deference from staff to him as a leader did not materialise and this adversely affected his ability to provide acceptable leadership in the organisation.

Recommended reading

Mullins, Chapter 9, (*Individual Differences*).

Robbins, Chapter 10, (*Communication*).

6. What processes are required to support the adaptation of international staff into different cultural settings?

Managers who are sensitive to the dynamics of interaction of staff and managers in the globalised context are more likely to take proactive measures to help to prepare persons in the cultural setting, and those who are entering it, for cross-cultural differences. As indicated, informal mechanisms and social interactions can help to build openness. In global companies, structured cross-cultural training is required for both parties to help to modulate the inevitable differences in perception and approaches for all parties.

7. In a cross-cultural or multi-cultural situation, how should managers approach differences and conflicts?

In multi-cultural situations, managers have an additional responsibility to be sensitive to cultural differences. They need to be aware of and sensitive to perceptions of roles, perceptions of acceptable behaviour and expectation of leadership. To be effective in dealing with people all managers need a willingness to listen and to be non-judgmental and non-defensive. In a cross-cultural setting, these qualities are doubly important.

8. What advice would you give to Vinette?

Advice to Vinette could include a combination of options. For each, the pros and cons should be listed:

- Providing opportunities and training for Komo and the staff to articulate their perceptions, appreciate differences and develop skills for dealing with conflict.
- Providing support to Komo, through coaching or counselling to help him appreciate the consequences of his actions on the staff vis-à-vis his own goals for the office.
- Arranging for the transfer of Komo to another posting.
- Dismissing Komo, which should be taken only as a last resort, since this would destroy the career of an otherwise promising individual.

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Merrill-Sands, Deborah and Holvino, Evangelina with Cumming, James (November 2000), *Working with Diversity: A Focus on Global Organizations*, Centre for Gender in Organisations (CGO), Working Paper, No. 11. (See abstract in Exhibit 1)

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Exhibit 1

Merrill-Sands, Deborah and Holvino, Evangelina with Cumming, James (November 2000), *Working with Diversity: A Focus on Global Organizations*, CGO Working Paper, No. 11.

Abstract

This paper provides an applied knowledge base of concepts, strategies, and methods for working with diversity in organizations, particularly those operating in a global context. It synthesizes a wide range of research and experience from different disciplines, countries, and organizational settings and is designed to challenge and stimulate new ways of thinking about diversity and its meaning for organizations. We envision working with diversity as weaving diversity into the very fabric of the organization; that is, integrating the varied knowledge, experiences, perspectives, and values that people of diverse backgrounds bring into an organization's strategy, goals, work, products, systems and structures. With this framing of diversity, this paper aims to assist leaders, managers, staff, and change agents to craft a strategy and approach to working with diversity that is appropriate to their organizations' specific needs and aspirations. The paper summarizes strategic forces motivating organizations to work more intentionally with diversity; defines three distinct approaches to working with diversity: the social differences lens, the cultural differences lens, and the cognitive-functional lens; and reviews two major diversity change strategies: the organizational development approach and the action research and collaborative inquiry approach. Throughout the paper, we analyze the strengths and weakness of the various strategies and approaches presented.

Ely, Robin J. and Thomas, David A. (August 2000), *Cultural Diversity at Work: The Moderating Effects of Work Group Perspectives on Diversity*, CGO Working Paper, No. 10.

Abstract

This paper develops theory about the conditions under which cultural diversity enhances or detracts from organizational functioning. From qualitative research in three culturally diverse organizations, we identified three different perspectives on workforce diversity: the "integration-and-learning" perspective, the "access-and-legitimacy" perspective, and the "discrimination-and-fairness" perspective. The perspective on diversity a work group held influenced how people expressed and managed tensions related to diversity, whether those who had been traditionally underrepresented in the organization felt respected and valued by their colleagues, and how people interpreted the meaning of their racial identity at work. These in turn had implications for how well the work group and its members functioned. All three perspectives on diversity had been successful in motivating managers to diversify their staffs, but only the integration-and-learning perspective provided the kind of rationale and guidance people needed to achieve sustained benefits from diversity. By identifying the conditions that intervene between the demographic composition of a work group and its outcomes, our research helps to explain mixed results on the relationship between cultural diversity and organizational functioning.

Kolb, Deborah and Merrill-Sands, Deborah (March 1999), *Waiting for Outcomes: Anchoring Gender Equity and Organizational Change in Cultural Assumptions*, CGO Working Paper, No. 1.

Abstract

This paper argues that strategies to promote gender equity in organizations need to focus on assumptions in the organizational culture that underpin work practices and behaviors. An analytic case is used to demonstrate the importance of bringing cultural assumptions to the surface during the organizational change process and examining their implications for both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. Initial efforts aimed at changing work practices were disappointing. However, the understanding that cultural assumptions had unintended consequences for both gender equity and organizational effectiveness provided a foundation for the organization to continue to experiment after the initial intervention. In this way, they were able to move the change effort forward as opportunities opened up. The paper argues that linking changes in work practices and processes to underlying assumptions provides a basis for the organization to engage in an on-going and iterative process of inquiry, experimentation, reflection, and learning that can generate surprising and positive outcomes.