



Preserving social identity in diverse workforce: the perspective of management and employees

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary organizations are confronting the issue of managing and retaining diverse workforce. This issue of diversity management becomes more significant when employees are very pertinent about preserving their social and cultural identity. Multiple diversity management programs are used to cater the issue of heterogeneity of the employees. Our paper focused on the management and employees' perspective on diversity management while keeping in view the social identity of employees. Our theoretical underpinning was based on the idea that success of diversity management programs is contingent on the volitional participation of employees. Qualitative research methodology was followed to explain the management and employee opinion about diversity management in context of social identity. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of 12 representatives of management and employees. It was found that there are differing opinions of employees and management which are the main cause behind the failure of diversity management programs. This research—conducted in Pakistani fast food chain store—is completely new up to the best of knowledge. The findings of this research will contribute towards the theoretical understanding and practical applications of diversity management.

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Introduction

The modern world today experiences rapid changes in every sector of life (Qin, O'Meara, & McEachern, 2009). There are numerous reasons for this, from integration of world markets through globalization, mergers and acquisitions, legal and regulatory pressure to diversifying customer bases, an increase in the complexity of jobs and disturbance in the external environment (Seymen, 2006; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Modern organizations can no longer survive with invalid methods of doing business. In order to maintain well-trained staff, most organizations are implementing various changes in their strategies, especially those related to employees' recruitment and retention (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2002).

As global interaction becomes commonplace, meaning more and more people live and work in their non-native countries, individuals are faced with daily interaction with people from different cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds (Fearon, 2003; Lian & Oneal, 1997). The creation of the term "diversity" coincided with this globalization process (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Sturgeon, 2007). The subject of "diversity" remains an ongoing research opportunity since its inception. The specific reason for this continuous review of diversity is due to a lack of consensus about its meaning and importance (Bhadury, Mighty, & Damar, 2000).

The current academic inquiries centered on diversity span multiple disciplines, decades, and theoretical platforms. This made it difficult for management teams to discover which cases best fit their organization. It is found that organizations either prioritize diversity after realizing its competitive advantages or simply to comply with human rights legislation (Jain & Verma, 1996; Miller, Gloria, Rowney, & Julie, 1999). Millikens and

Martins (1996) noted that, 'Diversity is a double edge sword which could increase the penetration of creativity and innovation within organization and could also create misunderstanding between workforce and management due to perspective differentiation'.

There is also a continuous pressure to rectify the inconsistencies of recent and more outdated research findings in the field. Certain studies, such as Cox et al., work in (1991), showed that workforce diversity positively impacts quality of knowledge and information within an organization. However, others, like Humphries and Grice (1995) study, identified negative impacts of diversity on performance. Whereas, recent literature reveals that diversity creates varying effects that can both positively and negatively affect a business (Reagans, Zuckerman, & McEvily, 2004). This study seeks to compare managerial and employee perspectives of diversity, understand social identity perspective of workers and identify potential causes behind failure of diversity training programs.

Diversity and Social Identity

Diversity has been studied in various contexts, but three main theories of diversity remain the focus of researchers (Haas, 2010). These theories contain both positive and negative aspects of diversity and are known as the Information Processing/ Problem Solving Theory (IDA), the Similarity-Attraction Theory (SAT) and the Social Identity Theory (SIT). In current research work, Social Identity Theory of diversity by Tajfel (2010) has been explored. The purpose behind this selection is the desire to explore and understand how workers perceive themselves and others in relation to diversity at workplace and outside workplace (Reagans, et al., 2004). Social identity is the main method of identifying and distinguishing individuals who

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have different background in terms of gender, ethnicity and religion (Shayo, 2009). The social identity approach is used extensively in various domains ranging from economics to political science to organizational behavior.

However, this basic definition lacks comprehensiveness. According to Hogg and Vaughan's (2002) research, social identity is the person's self-concept derived from perceived membership of community. This happens when individuals use visible salient features such as gender, race, and sex to associate themselves with distinct groups (Erwin, 2009). This definition does not provide a detailed understanding of social identity theory.

Social identity theory highlights the point that those different team members within a working group may have different perceptions about a situation. It is important to respect the identity of each team member (Ellemers, Van Rijswijk, Roefs, & Simons, 1997). Thus, social identity theory is not just limited to sociological aspects of human behavior but also includes psychological aspects (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Ullah, 2010).

Within the broad framework of Social Identity theory, every individual in an organization is seen to have many identities, either social or personal, associated with them. Each of these identities enables them to understand who they are (Akerlof & Kranton, 2005). An individual always tend to relate to others in an interpersonal manner (Reicher, et al., 1995; Ullah, Jafri, & Dost, 2011; Ullah, Jafri, Gondal, & Dost, 2011). But, this theory is related to the 'behavior' of individuals and how each person in this world gives value to identity and believes in an association with a distinct social group (Livingstone & Haslam, 2008). People want others to recognize the value of their group (Erwin, 2009).

If top management introduces new strategies that affect the social identity of employees, it is possible that employees may be unable to adjust to these changes (Smith, 1993). Some researchers argue that according to social identity theory, if employees are unable to change their social status, they start to compare themselves with other members of the team (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This allows group members to redefine negative elements associated with their group identity.

Humans are inundated with the need to classify and categorize (Hogg, 2006; Stets & Burke, 2000). There is a constant struggle to define and analyze the differences in the world, and consequently people tend to apply this method of classification to their positions within society (Erwin, 2009). Employees strive to understand their social identities, and they achieve this by associating themselves with a particular group (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Zerubevel (1996) found that one of the first things humans do when they meet someone for the first time is to try and categorize them into groups and allocate them a place in their "mindscapes". For instance, a person from India working in London may like to be called British resident after spending period of 5 years (less or more).

Social identity theory suggests that a person's self-concepts are dynamic and can vary from situation to situation (Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus, individuals have multiple social identities at different levels: individual, familial, organizational, and national. It is important for the organization to understand this concept, as it enables them to practice diversity training programs that respect the social identities of their employees.

The topic of diversity has been investigated several times in previous research endeavors including those by William and

O'Reilly (1998) and Mannix and Neale (2005). However, the explanation of managerial and employee perspective regarding diversity along with social identity theory in order to identify potential causes behind the failure of diversity training program is a new and unique topic in its nature. The current study is important from academicians and practitioners because it will help to understand the concept of diversity from two different perspectives (managerial and employee perspectives). This research work is crucial to make a contribution in the field of diversity.

Methodology

In current investigation, social constructionism paradigm was considered to encompass through various human perspectives. The main focus of current research is to explore the perspectives of two different groups about diversity. Thus this scenario demands a social constructionism paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). In the current study, a qualitative approach has been used. According to Babbie (2003) qualitative research helps to extract culturally specific information about the perspectives and social context of targeted population. Frost and Durrant (2003) added that qualitative research not just identifies human issues but also presents findings that were not produced before.

Instrument of Data Collection

In the current scenario, semi-structured interviews (a qualitative data collection tool) were used to explore managerial and employee perspectives in relation to social identity. According to Yin (2006) semi-structured interviews are often the best available qualitative tool to extract the key information from small number of interviewees. Creswell (2003) stated that responses collected through semi-structured interviews are highly reliable because here the interviewer has total control over the environment and respondents feel comfortable while discussing complex issues. However, there are some limitations associated with semi-structured interviews, including high cost, time consumption and disclosure of anonymity (Saunders, et al., 2009). In current investigation this was not the case. In this study twelve (12) interview appointments of around forty (40) minutes each with all respondents were pre-booked. Respondents were ensured about their anonymity and confidentiality. Thus the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in order to provide freedom of perspective to interviewees in relation to diversity and social identity.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The target population in current research was management and workforce of PIZZA HUT—a fast food chain. Population sampling is arguably the most important part of a research and an error in this section can adversely affect all findings and analysis (Creswell, 2003). Convenience sampling technique among the available non-probability sampling techniques was used in this study. Convenience sampling refers to the collection of information from a targeted population that is conveniently accessible (Bryman, 2001). Instead of generalization, this research work had considered the detailed insight of issues related to diversity management. One of the major reasons behind the selection of convenient sampling is because it is fast, inexpensive and requires easily accessible subjects (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

The sample consisted of total (12) interviewees including six (6) managers and six (6) workers from all the employees of PIZZA HUT. The six individuals from store management were;

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. Area Manager | 4. Accountant |
| 2. Branch Manager | 5. HR Manager |
| 3. Duty Manager | 6. Team Leader |

The six (6) store workers included 3 operation assistants and 3 shop floor assistants.

Data Analysis

It is crucial to mention the approach adopted to analyze qualitative data (Saunders, et al., 2009). There are several methods to analyze qualitative data. A version of content analysis was used for the purpose of data analysis in current research. Different researchers have called content analysis a systematic research to quantify phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Gillham, 2005; Sandelowski, 1995). The categories of all responses gathered for each question and from the twelve (12) interviewees were created. All categories had been reviewed and assigned to relevant headings. All the statements from respondents had been written in front of relevant prompts in form of quotes. In write up section of content analysis the overall attitude of store management and store workers toward diversity is presented. The results of data analysis had been successfully compared with literature on diversity, diversity training programs (cross-cultural communication skills training program) and social identity theory of diversity.

Results

Management Perspective

All six respondents from managerial side stated that diversity at work is a positive thing. One manager said that a diverse workforce helps in solving various organizational problems. He stated that *"Diversity is a positive activity. The diverse workforce has different experiences from their life and help in solving various organizational issues and problems."* Another manager said, *"Diversity is a positive thing as diversity at work is beneficial both the employees and organization. It enhances the skills of employees and provides solution to various problems of organizations."*

One manager linked diversity with creation of safe and cooperative environment. He stated that *"Diversity is a positive thing. It helps an organization to create a safe and cooperative working environment and reflects a message to outer world that we follow legislation of equality and diversity."* Another interviewee from management side responded in favor of diversity and associated diversity with flexibility and creativity in the organization. According to him *"Diverse workers are a positive sign for any organization. Employees came from different origins with different set of ideas, values and beliefs which result in making the store more flexible and creative."*

These responses from managerial perspective are consistent with the findings of Nachbagauer and Reidle (2002) who found that management in most of institutions perceives that diversity delivers positive impact as it improves organizational reputation, helps to create mutual understanding in-between workers, creates safe and cooperative working environment and awards a range of options and ideas to solve critical problems.

Employee Perspective

The employee perspective was found to be opposite to the managerial perspective. Five out of total six employees considered diversity a negative thing.

One employee stated, *"Employees have to face certain problems from their colleagues who have different cultural and regional backgrounds. Diversity at the workplace can create relational issues and contradiction of behavior because different*

people have different values and beliefs. People may not necessarily agree with each other." Another employee considered diversity as a negative thing because organizations spend huge amounts in hiring and training diverse workers. According to him *"Organizations spend millions of rupees in hiring and managing the diverse workers. It cost them dearly."*

Above responses from interviewees indicate a clear difference in the approach of managers and employees. While the managers consider diversity beneficial for the organization and for employees as well, the employees consider diversity a negative thing and associate it with numerous problems at work.

Social Identity and Diversity

Three employees stated diversity and diversity management was an attack on their social identity as employees of the company. They must not be called diverse as this would isolate them from rest of the employee base. According to them *"The biggest problem associated with diversity and diversity management is that the employees lose their personal identity and they feel themselves detached from the community. One major issue regarding diversity is that employees consider themselves as minority by being called diverse."* Another respondent among employees considered that diverse workers consider them as minority which affects their career development. According to him, *"Diversity is a negative thing. The biggest attack of diversity is on career development of an employee. If an employee is working as a minority in Pakistan, there are less chances of his career development as compared to his counterparts and I don't want to work here as a minority."*

Management of the store perceives that the employees feel it difficult to work with people of different backgrounds and employees with different backgrounds often have conflicts among them. This is one reason why the store initiates cross-cultural communication program. The responses of managers and employees do not vary considerably when asked whether the employees prefer to work with people with a different background or a similar background.

Most of the managers thought that employees feel comfortable in working with people who have a similar sort of background. On the basis of this assumption they introduced cross-cultural communication program so that the employees would understand each other's culture and cooperate across cultural divides. But most of the workers do not consider themselves diverse as they have been working in Lahore from several years.

Five out of six managers believe that the workers find it difficult to work with people from different backgrounds. Following responses reflect the managerial thinking that during job workers prefer colleagues from similar sort of background. *"Employees may find it difficult to communicate with each other when they are from different backgrounds"*

"Store workers can find it difficult when they join store, that is why we set up cross cultural communication skills program to make them use to or aware about culture of store and store workers."

According to the responses of management and workers, it is clear that the management and employees have different opinions. The management personnel think that most employees prefer to work with people of similar background and most of the employees said that background of the employee made no difference to them.

These results are consistent with the results of Naff and Kellough (2003), who found that many employees may not like

to be called diverse. By calling the employees diverse they think that they are being associated with minority groups and feel isolated from other employees. The findings of Liaqat, Eisle, Khan, & Khan (2008) also support our results. According to them, in a multicultural work environment, employees may begin to feel that their career development or training is blocked due to 'demographic' reasons.

Discussion

The overall attitude of managers towards diversity was positive and all the managers considered diversity beneficial for the organization. On the other hand, the employees were dissatisfied by the diversity at work. Five out of total six employees considered diversity as a negative thing. According to Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002), management in most institutions perceives that diversity delivers positive impact as it improves organizational reputation. Syed and Kramar (2009) found that it is likely for employee perspective to be opposite to that of managers, and they may dislike being called 'diverse.'

All the responses from management were in favor of diversity management programs and the cross-cultural communication skills program launched at the store. However, the workers were again dissatisfied by the diversity management programs and the cross cultural communication skills program launched at the store. All the employees were unwilling to participate in the cross-cultural communication program. Their grievances included additional work without any reward, uninteresting and boring training and no consultation with the employees by the management. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2005) found that a company might introduce diversity management initiatives to reduce employee grievances. But, from the employees' perspective, this can be a negative step taken to isolate them from other employees.

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Conclusion

The management of PIZZA HUT did not consult the employees prior to launching the training program. Employees appreciate diversity training programs that are introduced with their consultation and consent (Reichenberg, 2001). Findings of the current study suggest that the employees display resistance to the cross cultural communication skills program due to lack of consultation and discussion by the management, no additional pay or benefits, and staying overtime at work. The management aims to empower their employees and reduce their feelings of isolation through the cross-cultural communication skills program. The employees feel themselves as part of the local community because they have been working here from several years and in the PIZZA HUT from 3 months to 12 months. Results suggest that when the employees have to participate in the cross-cultural communication program, they feel themselves detached from rest of the employee base. Thus, their feelings of isolation are increased by the cross-cultural communication program, rather than reduced. In practical terms, employees believe that these programs must be focused towards empowering the workforce instead of isolating segments of the employee base (Syed & Kramar, 2009).

Hence, there is big difference in the perspectives of management and employees. Unless these lacunae are filled, the results of the cross-cultural communication skills program cannot be positive.

According to Pollar (1998), the success of diversity management initiatives is not possible until employee perspectives regarding diversity and organizational need are considered.

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