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An Innovative Approach to Cultural Competence Organizational Leadership: The Intercultural Personal Development

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An Innovative Approach to Cultural Competence Organizational Leadership: The Intercultural Personal Development Council

by Sherwood Thompson

Leaders are called upon in today's society to be sensitive to and aware of the needs of their workforce. In many instances, these needs transcend the professional requirement of getting the job done. Oftentimes, the employees are dealing with needs that involve personal relationships between and among co-workers based on cultural differences. A large portion of the United States is composed of people from different ethnicities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, and physical abilities. A person in a leadership position with cultural relevant knowledge cannot overlook these differences and progress as an effective leader—especially in an organization that is composed of diverse intercultural characteristics.

In the United States, with a workforce of approximately 155 million people, about one third are people of color according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As we reach the year 2020, even more people of color will constitute the labor force. This dynamic demographic indicates that organizational leaders are going to need a culturally relevant understanding of diverse populations in order to work more effectively with individuals and teams with diverse backgrounds.

Building an IPDC

The concept of intercultural personal development councils (IPDC) is not new. Business leaders have been utilizing some form of a personal development council for decades, though they are called by many different names. In essence, a personal development council is a collection of experts that lend their knowledge and leadership in advising individuals on matters pertaining to their area of expertise. The personal development council members bring unique knowledge and skills to assist individuals in their professional goals and objectives related to their organization. Council members serve to make recommendations and/or provide key information, materials, and resources to help individuals reach their goals. The reason for having a personal development council is to have trusted individuals that will give correct information about

issues that will assist the leader in making decisions that will steer him or her away from wrong actions and thinking.

In establishing an intercultural personal development council, one must be aware of the need to select persons that are credible within their cultural community and among the majority population. In a workforce that is two-thirds European American, careful attention must be paid to selecting a representative from the African American community, Asian community, Latino/Hispanic community, and so on. If the leader is a person of color, it is highly recommended that they select a European American as a member of the IPDC. This mixture of diverse individuals will assist the leader in understanding the nature and cultural nuances that each cultural group brings to the workplace environment.

Benefits of Establishing an IPDC

An IPDC is formed to address the need of an organizational leader who requires assistance with understanding how to appropriately relate to diverse populations without stereotyping those who are different from his or her own background. This is an important leadership attribute when working in a diverse environment. The leader must speak with authority, using appropriate language that does not offend members of the organization. Words are precise messages and sometimes, even with the best of intentions, they get in the way of what we are trying to say. A lack of cultural knowledge has a lot to do with the misunderstanding of word usage when a leader has not been made aware of the right language to use among different cultural groups. An individual can be swayed to think a certain way based solely on the choice of words that are spoken. This influence has a monumental impact on the choices an individual makes, the way the individual thinks, and the political persuasion the individual embraces. These choices can have a positive or negative impact on the overall organization depending on the leader's knowledge of

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cultural standards.

Members of the IPDC serve as a personal advisory board to leaders, sharing their tremendous knowledge about how to be effective in diverse environments. Of course, this information helps the leader to be armed with the proper knowledge to address the diverse workforce in a respectful manner. The IPDC members offer the right blend of advice about religious practices among group members; share the appropriate way to handle family matters that may challenge group members; and give the leader information about cultural holidays, ceremonies, and rituals in an attempt to keep the leader informed of the appropriateness of handling multiple situations among diverse populations.

It is beneficial to establish an IPDC, especially when the leader has little experience working in a diverse setting. The simple matter of choosing the right words to address people from different cultural backgrounds is critical to maintaining a harmonious existence between and among diverse members of the workforce. The leader must avoid jargon and slang because words can carry negative connotations. Imagine that your workforce is made up of members of a particular Native American population, and in talking, you explain to your managers the need to "circle the wagons" and find a solution to a certain problem. In this case, what the leader understands as the meaning of the phrase could be completely different than that of his or her Native American co-workers. This could inadvertently cause conflict and tremendous misunderstandings. This interpretation of words and their meanings is ancillary to how individuals act. Their behavior is impacted by their beliefs and how they translate the words that they and others around them speak. And those seemingly simple words can cause resistance and tension which could have been avoided if the person using them had been properly educated about the meaning and how a particular group might perceive the meaning.

Another benefit of having an IPDC is to have trusted people working with a leader that are committed to the goals of the organization and are willing to put in the necessary time and effort to be available to the leader to give valuable guiding information on matters that address proper understanding and dispositions about culture and cultural populations. This guidance is important in assisting the leader in overcoming misunderstandings and cultural confusion. The IPDC

members can inform the leader about the appropriate behavior norms, and help the leader become comfortable with working in a diverse environment.

Some questions leaders should ask when selecting IPDC members include: Is this person a well-respected individual that can assist the leader in feeling comfortable about understanding different cultures? In what ways can this person assist the leader? What are his or her strengths (e.g., language, cultural customs, helping ease integration of racial populations, etc)? Is this person resourceful (i.e., can he or she suggest any good contacts and ways to enrich the organization)? Will this person help the leader to develop a workplace environment that values all individuals? Does this person have meaningful ways to help the leader in making diverse populations feel welcome and included in the organization? Will this person be honest with the leader and point out any biases and stereotypes that might negatively impact the organization's workforce? Is this person diplomatic and trustworthy, demonstrating allegiance to and not sharing sensitive information with others about his or her conversations with the leader?

IPDC Members are the Champions of an Organization's Intercultural Initiatives

The IPDC can be a tremendous complement to the effectiveness of leaders' interactions with their workforce and with external stakeholders. The IPDC's foremost responsibility is to lend its leadership to helping leaders solve potential problems and making recommendations on improving workplace situations involving diverse populations. They are campaigners and they help leaders to exploit opportunities for cross-cultural training and immersion experiences for all employed workers.

Striving toward a harmonious existence between people of different cultural backgrounds is basic to the ideals of a truly democratic society. In the process of recognizing that the United States is a multicultural nation, resistance and tension will naturally occur. The IPDC is one approach to helping organizational leaders attain culturally relevant knowledge from a diverse group of individuals who are willing to counsel and give direction on important steps. This, in turn, assists leaders working in diverse settings to reach their full potential and avoid many pitfalls that involve cultural misunderstandings along the way. ■