

RESOURCEFULNESS IN ACTION:
THE CASE OF GLOBAL DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

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For:

Positive Organizing in a Global Society: Understanding and Engaging Differences for Capacity-Building and Inclusion. L.M. Roberts, L. Wooten, & M. Davidson (Eds.)

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ABSTRACT:

In this essay, I highlight “social identity resourcing” as a generative mechanism whereby individuals’ social identities are used as assets to develop a vision and strategy for global diversity management. Social identity resourcing includes two forms: harnessing and integrating. *Harnessing* refers to practices that enable organizational members to share their perspectives on how global diversity management should be approached. *Integrating* reflects the actual use of different perspectives to implement a global vision and strategy for diversity management. In doing so, this essay departs from past research on global diversity management which focuses revealing the differences between a global and a multi-domestic (i.e., country-level) approach to diversity management (e.g., Nishii & Ozbilgin, 2007; Sippola & Smale, 2007) or highlighting a conceptual framework for managing global diversity (Mor Barak, 2014). Instead, this essay draws on both diversity management research (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Ramarajan & Thomas, 2010; Thomas & Ely, 1996) and a positive organizational scholarship (POS) perspective (Feldman, 2004; Fredrickson & Dutton, 2008; Sonenshein, 2014) to reveal a social identity-based mechanism that promotes individual and collective flourishing in global organizations.

“Your vision has to be a vision that resonates around the globe. If it doesn’t resonate around the globe, people can feel like they can opt out of the vision because it really doesn’t apply to them....[In addition,] any diversity strategy not aligned with the core messaging, core deliverables of the company is doomed to failure.” --Diversity Leader (DL002)

Introduction

Without a doubt, organizational diversity initiatives can and do fail (Davidson, 2011; Jacobsen, 2014; Visconti, 2011). Yet, like the diversity leader in the opening quote and a growing body of research on global diversity management suggest, “vision” and “strategy” are some of the most valuable resources that diversity leaders can have at their disposal for preventing such failure (Mor Barak, 2014; Nishii & Ozbilgin, 2007; Sippola & Smale, 2007). However, developing and mobilizing a vision and strategy for diversity management can be difficult for diversity leaders given that these actions require them to adopt a business perspective (Creary, 2008; Lahiri, 2008; Mitchell & Creary, 2009). Notably, scholars have argued that a business perspective on diversity management may be too “idealistic” and may potentially mask a “moral imperative” to address issues of inclusion and exclusion along socio-demographic lines in organizations (Ramarajan & Thomas, 2010; Wrench, 2005). In regards to race in particular, Wrench (2005: 78) stated, “The problem is that fighting racism and discrimination will now only be seen as important if there is a recognizable business reason for it.” As a result, diversity leaders who have been interested historically in managing issues of inequality in their organizations, may find it difficult to embrace a “strategic partner” role (Lahiri, 2008; Mitchell & Creary, 2009).

In this essay, I use the case of global diversity management in 14 large multinational organizations (12 American, one European, one Asian) to illustrate how diversity leaders took a positive approach to global diversity management in spite of the tension they were

experiencing in their role. In doing so, I also offer a POS perspective of global diversity management in which I examine a phenomenon in which identity group-based differences are thought to matter and focus on an established condition of positive deviance (e.g., Ramarajan & Thomas, 2010). Specifically, I propose “social identity resourcing” as a generative mechanism whereby individuals’ social identities are engaged as organizational assets to create new resources. By “social identities,” I refer to one or more social categories or memberships (e.g., race, ethnicity) represented in an individual’s self-concept in which he or she shares some degree of emotional involvement with other ingroup members and that describe and prescribe how one should think, feel, and behave as a group member (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By “resourcing,” I refer to the creation in practice of assets such that they enable actors to enact schemas or knowledge structures (Feldman, 2004; Sonenshein, 2014). Sonenshein (2014) revealed how an employee in a retail store engaged in “creative resourcing” by transforming a dress that was not selling into beachwear. Thus, by “social identity resourcing,” I refer to the practice through which diversity leaders engaged organizational members’ social identities as assets for creating a vision and strategy for global diversity management.

In taking a POS of global diversity management, this essay departs from past research on global diversity management that focuses on drawing comparisons between a global and a multi-domestic (i.e., country-level) approach to diversity management (e.g., Nishii & Ozbilgin, 2007; Sippola & Smale, 2007) or discussing a conceptual framework for managing global diversity (Mor Barak, 2014). Instead, it invites diversity and POS scholars, practitioners, and educators to consider a social identity-based mechanism that promotes both individual and collective flourishing in global organizations.

Rethinking Diversity Management: Background on the Development of Global Diversity Initiatives

Prior to 2008, the diversity practices within each of the organizations I studied were focused largely on managing differences by increasing the representation of individuals from historically underrepresented groups in frontline and leadership positions in different markets around the world, or “developing diverse talent.” In some organizations, this practice was motivated largely by a legal push for equal opportunity and social justice. In others, it reflected the organization’s desire to draw on the insights that individuals have gained through their membership in different social groups to understand and gain entrée into diverse markets around the world (for a larger discussion of similar dynamics, please refer to Ely & Thomas, 2001; Thomas & Ely, 1996). While the current practice was met with skepticism particularly from majority group members, it was recognized widely particularly within North American and European markets as the going approach to including more members of historically excluded social groups in leadership activities.

Between 2008 and 2009, each of these organizations began increasing efforts to globalize its operations starting with the development of an overarching strategy that could be viewed as relevant not just within individual markets, but in different markets around the world. As a consequence, current diversity practices needed to be reconsidered so they could support the execution of such a strategy. Yet, support for a more global approach to diversity management was not widespread. For example, one diversity leader compared the challenges in her company to elections for public office:

You’ve got a base, and you’ve got to figure out how you keep your base and then extrapolate to the new potential voters or constituents. The base of diversity truly has been a U.S. thing. So how do you keep that base engaged, happy, feeling like they’re important and people care about them while you drive a global strategy and not have

the U.S. base feel like, 'Our window has closed. Our day has come and gone.'
(DL002)

Encountering a perspective such as this motivated diversity leaders in my sample to take actions that would enable a wider group of stakeholders (supporters and non-supporters) to become more engaged in global diversity management. Hence, they began reconceptualizing their existing approaches to diversity management.

Social Identity Resourcing

I found that diversity leaders engaged in *social identity resourcing* in order create a vision and strategy for diversity management that was more global in its orientation. Social identity resourcing involved engaging organizational members' social identities as assets for developing and mobilizing a global vision and strategy for diversity. Social identity resourcing took two forms: harnessing and integrating. *Harnessing* refers to practices that enabled organizational members from different social groups opportunities to share their perspectives on how global diversity management should be approached. For each organization, this meant creating venues in which organizational members of all socio-demographic backgrounds would be invited to contribute to the development of the vision and strategy. In US-based companies, harnessing involved the creation of task forces comprised senior leaders from different demographic groups (e.g., women, African-American, disabilities, generations, etc.) to talk about global diversity. One diversity leader described her organization's approach to global diversity management:

... we have ten global teams that are truly global, made up of senior leaders from all of our business units and a representation of our geographies in both developed and developing markets. And these ten teams of about 260 senior leaders are representatives of 32 countries and speak 19 languages. And they're being charged with developing a strategy that will work globally...each of these ten teams has an executive sponsor who is an executive vice president [and] not a member of the constituency that they are the sponsor...we're asking them, 'How do we accelerate

leadership and create a more globally inclusive environment?’ And for our businesses that are focused externally, ‘How do we positively influence the buying decision of customers?’ And, ‘Are there key external stakeholders that we need to be collaborating with, in your constituency?’ (DL010)

While the American approach to global diversity management continued to prioritize talent development, it was broadened to include the notion that the company should be “a place where people around the globe, no matter who they are, where they come from...have a genuine opportunity to come to this company to contribute and be successful.”

In contrast, I found that the diversity leaders in the European and Asian companies were concentrating on convincing their executive teams that they were not “trying to push the American agenda.” Hence, their harnessing practices were focused much more on developing “cross-culturally competent” leaders. For example, a diversity leader in the Asian company revealed that her organization decided to develop an “agenda on culture” since the number one diversity challenge in her organization was to help Eastern and Western employees work together more effectively across difference.

Where harnessing focuses on soliciting perspectives from members of different social groups on global diversity management, the *integrating* form of social identity resourcing reflects the actual use of these perspectives to mobilize a vision and strategy for global diversity management. Diversity leaders in many US-based organizations discussed using employee affinity groups (i.e., Women’s network, African American network, LGBT network, Intergenerational network, etc.) as tools for integration. One diversity leader explained:

Our network groups are still focused on employee development. [Yet,] to some extent, they support marketplace research or ideas or they support research the company is doing. Like the LGBT network has been helpful in looking at potential

partnerships for [the company] or potential market opportunities and the women's networks have looked at some opportunities as well. (DL008)

In contrast, the European and Asian companies reported that they had appointed non-American leaders to be “cultural ambassadors” for their global diversity initiatives to mitigate some of the concern that the current approach to diversity management was “too US-centric.” For example, the European company hired a European man who had worked in the company for more than 20 years to be the “face of diversity” in Europe. In his role, the European diversity leader worked with the American diversity leader and the business leaders to understand and bridge cultural differences in their countries and marketplaces.

Finally, I found that social identity resourcing had the consequence of altering the sense of ownership for diversity management in each of the companies. Whereas diversity management under the previous approach was considered wholly owned by the diversity leader, the new approach to global diversity management fostered a shared sense of ownership between senior leadership and diversity leaders. For example, the American diversity leader in the Asian company worked with her organization’s chairman and senior leadership team to promote cross-cultural competence in their organizations. She shared an example of their progress:

Three weeks ago we had an orientation here in China for all the new hires. Our chairman spent three hours with the new hires talking with them about the history of the company, his vision, and he talked about culture. He talked about being a global company, the importance of teamwork across culture, value and diversity. Our chairman--three hours with new hires. I don’t know too many chairmen who would take the time. (DL013)

As a result of experiencing a shared sense of ownership for global diversity management, many diversity leaders reported that they found it easier to embrace their “strategic partner” role. One diversity leader commented on her reconfigured role:

I really see my role as enabling the organization to [manage diversity] at the business unit level, and that's about as far as I can go. My executive champion meets monthly for half a day with the CEO and all of his peers, and [diversity management] is an agenda item, and I'm not at that meeting....So, he behaves in a way that [suggests that diversity] is really important. And he's causing others to behave in that way as well (DL005).

Conclusion

In this essay, I advance a POS perspective of global diversity management by revealing *social identity resourcing* as a social identity-based mechanism that addresses issues of inclusion and exclusion in organizations while also maintaining a business perspective of diversity management (cf., Ramarajan & Thomas, 2010). In this respect, social identity resourcing is an important mechanism for engaging differences for capacity-building and inclusion in global organizations. Specifically, the *harnessing* form recognizes that giving organizational members from different socio-demographic backgrounds the opportunity to contribute to development of a vision and strategy for global diversity management is critical to the organization's success. The *integrating* form goes one step further to suggest that actually engaging these organizational members in implementation initiatives is important for creating a shared responsibility for diversity management and one that extends beyond the diversity leader's purview. Future research and practice on diversity and inclusion and POS should continue this line of inquiry by revealing other mechanisms through which individuals' social identities, particularly those that have been stigmatized or marginalized historically, can contribute to individual and collective flourishing and how engaging leaders at different levels of the organization can enable this work.

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