

**The process of designing a self-assessment strategy for diversity
management**

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Abstract

The paper describes the process that was followed to design a tool for self-assessment of strategies to manage diversity in Australian schools and public sector workplaces. Various benchmarks for diversity management in diversity sensitive Australian organisations are incorporated. The steps in the design of a self-assessment strategy are discussed. Focus groups revised drafts of the 'Managing Diversity: Self-assessment Tool'. Recommendations for future research of the instrument's effectiveness are noted.

The educational sector and school reform

The aim of this paper is to describe decision points in the design process of the first Australian set of self-assessment and implementation strategies for managing diversity in schools and public sector workplaces.

In the 1999 document "A new Agenda for Multicultural Australia" the Federal Government emphasised four principles including productive diversity which maximises for all Australians the significant cultural, social and economic dividends arising from the diversity in the population. There is a direction to utilise the principles for workplace diversity planning strategies in the public and private sectors.

Schools are preparing diverse students in a multicultural Australian society to face a future with technological advances, globalisation and social challenges. School system reforms can include changes to infrastructure, expanding strategic foundations, building a cohesive school community and using 'authentic pedagogy' (Crowther, 2000) to enhance outcomes to meet challenges. In most states more decision-making has been allowed at local school level to cope with unique local demands.

School system restructuring also includes adjustment to human resource management systems and managing diversity. For example the Victorian Government's public policy directions influence the Department of Education's Corporate and Business Plan. The latter Plan articulates the values, vision and mission that guide the Department's strategic priorities. A People Management Framework enhances the capacity of the Department to achieve its strategic priorities (Maguire & Palamara, 1999). The framework embraces four key components of people management namely workforce planning, performance excellence, professional development and work environment. Objectives and actions for improved practice are formulated for each component. Managing and valuing diversity is one of the action categories in the Performance Excellence component.

The Link of Diversity Management to Organisational and Human Resource Management Strategy

In Australia diversity within employee populations includes the issues of gender, physical disability, ethnicity, age, race, sexual orientation, education, family situation and status, language, hierarchical status, profession, religion and life style. The term managing diversity refers to management practices that value and develops workplace diversity to better achieve performance and service to a diverse community (Maguire & Palamara, 1999). Workforce diversity is one of the key factors for effective management but relatively little discussion of diversity issues exist on executive level in Australian organisations (Sinclair 1996).

Diversity is sometimes regarded as a concept or a specific program run in an organisation. Kramar et al (1997) recommend that links between strategic human resource management and diversity management ensure that affirmative action programs are integrated with organisational objectives and strategic plans and EEO is an integral part of business activity and success. Managing diversity should be a corporate strategy directly tied into the business strategy for managing organisational change and improving productivity. Therefore the authors of this paper believe that diversity management programs or initiatives will be more successful if they are integrated into the strategic human resource programs that support organisational strategic plans.

From minimal legal compliance to diversity sensitive organisations

Federal and state laws dealing with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), anti-discrimination and Affirmative Action (AA) designate four target groups namely women, people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decent, people of non-English-speaking background and people with disabilities. Two distinct forces drive diversity initiatives in the public sector namely compliance with EEO legislation and an emerging customer service and business focus. Government bodies are under more intense pressure to comply with legislation than are private sector organisations (Sinclair 1996, Smith 1998).

Organisations can be classified using a specific typology of organisational forms describing their approach to managing diversity. In minimal legal compliance organisations diversity is an issue that stirs irritation and there is an expectation to conform to a standard. In equal opportunity or non-discriminatory companies, organisations begin to adhere to affirmative action or equal employment opportunity regulations, focus on specific target groups and people tolerate differences. In multicultural or diversity sensitive organisations differences are recognised and valued. Policies and procedures are flexible, a diverse staff is seen as a strategic advantage and managers are held accountable for building productive work teams with an inclusive focus (Adler 1991, Cox & Blake 1991, Cox 1993, Gardenswartz & Rowe 1993, Jackson & Ruderman 1997; Prasad, Mills, Elmes & Prasad 1997).

In contrast to the classification approach, other researchers suggest that an organisation can evolve from being a minimum legal compliance to a diversity sensitive organisation by following a series of steps (Esty, Griffin & Hirsch 1995; Griggs & Louw 1995) or a gradual evolutionary process with no definitive demarcations (see Batonda 1995; Erwee, Perry and Tidwell 1999).

Australian organisations in the multicultural phase and non-discriminatory stages of evolution are more open to change (Erwee & Innes, 1998). Equal proportions of managers in public sector organisations describe such institutions as monocultural, non-discriminatory or multicultural. In contrast, managers in private sector companies are more likely to describe their company as monocultural. In this research a subscale 'Openness to change' had one of the highest reliabilities suggesting that diversity management is part of a larger organisational context (Erwee & Innes, 1998).

The authors of this paper note that the flexibility of the school or school system to a changing environment and attitude towards internal and external change creates the context in which diversity is managed in the school system. We argue that schools are organisations that gradually evolve diversity management strategies over time.

Benchmarks of diversity management in Australian organisations

Smith's (1998) seven phases in a program to manage diversity may be used as generic benchmarks. For example the first step is ensuring that organisation leaders is committed and personally involved in managing diversity. The next benchmark is whether a Diversity Council is involved in setting business reasons for managing diversity. A third benchmark is whether employee surveys focus groups or targeted interviews have been conducted to assess the climate for diversity management. In the fourth step a range of measures such as performance evaluations, bonuses tied to achievement of diversity goals, flexible work practices and mentor programs are included. The next step is an intervention stage with targeted actions including awareness training, changing the workforce profile and creating developmental opportunities and performance management systems. The final steps are progress checks on different levels and ongoing maintenance of programs.

The authors of this paper argue that school systems in different states and different types of schools (urban, rural, private or state schools) have their own benchmarks to measure progress on the continuum. This paper describes the first part of a process to identify these 'indicators'. The focus in this paper is on public sector organisations specifically schools who are towards the diversity- sensitive point on the continuum. Studies in public sector organisations could be a source of rich data on benchmarking and the evolution of diversity management programs.

The process of designing self-assessment strategies

Realism research relies on multiple perceptions that involve triangulation of several data sources, and of several peer researcher's interpretations of those triangulations (see Healy & Perry 1998). Another issue in this diversity research paper relating to perception is the selection of participants. One of the selection criteria is the extent to which the participants are engaged in managing diversity in their schools. Therefore, we argue that information gathered from interviews with senior managers such as principals in schools or regional representatives, project managers and corporate staff involved in diversity management could be an excellent data source for theory building research.

Use of focus groups in developing the draft self-assessment strategy

A focus group is defined as 'a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher' (Morgan 1996, p. 130). Focus groups in research

methodology can be justified on main points, namely, collection of preliminary information, savings in time and money, flexibility, group interaction and the active role of a researcher in addressing a research problem (Healy 1999). Focus group research is often described as the most useful and appropriate in the exploratory and developmental phases of research where little is known about the phenomenon of interest, such as this research.

The aims of this project were to conduct focus groups using the Managing Diversity Quarterly Forum (MDQF), Department of Education Victoria to obtain staff feedback and contribution in the development of a diversity audit tool and to document the appropriate diversity management indicators. The MDQF consists of principals, regional representatives, project managers and corporate staff and was established as an initiative by the Employee Relations branch in the Department.

Surveys or tools to measure diversity management

A previous research project used a positivist research paradigm (Erwee & Innes 1998) and used quantitative analysis of data obtained by a survey. One of the aims was to explore the perspectives of managers on the management of diversity in a sample of Australian companies by using a Diversity Survey (Erwee & Innes, 1998). This survey was based on an adaptation of American and South African research instruments (Strydom & Erwee 1999; Gardenswartz & Rowe 1993). In the Australian context (Erwee & Innes 1998) only three subscales had acceptable reliabilities (Diversity related problems, Extent of Organisational Change and Status Quo), two subscales had to be item and factor analysed to increase the reliabilities (Value & Management of Diversity) and one section (Barriers) had to be eliminated. These results indicate that the cross-cultural equivalence of an American survey in an Australian or South African context must not be assumed.

Steps in the process of designing a self-assessment strategy

The first author was invited to present research on diversity management in Australian organisations to the MDQF during February. The second and third authors (project officers) then formulated a brief to the first author to provide policy advice and develop a diversity audit tool for use by principals of schools and Victorian Public Service managers to identify diversity indicators for successful workplace performance. As decision-making has been allowed at local school level representatives of this group of stakeholders had to be included in the process. It was expected that there would be collaboration between the corporate office, regional representatives and schools.

The team decided that the diversity audit tool should complement the existing assessment strategies. A quality management process and philosophy of autonomy in management practices at school level include regular assessment. A major university conducts an annual organisational climate survey and a self-assessment strategy for a family friendly workplace project uses a checklist approach.

The Diversity Survey (Erwee & Innes 1998) was adapted as a basis for a diversity audit tool for the first focus group meeting in July. During the meeting MDQF members formed into smaller focus groups to select sections of the draft document, analyse the survey questions and indicate specific changes needed by Victorian schools. The larger focus group then discussed general requirements for an assessment tool.

A preliminary tool “Managing Diversity: Self-assessment Tool” was designed to describe the process of managing diversity and was initially divided into five sections namely needs analysis and strategy design, development plans, implementation checklists, maintenance and feedback. The project officers assisted in refining the draft by adapting definitions and simplifying the process to four steps. This draft was circulated to all MDQF members and selected parties in their region for comment. A decision was made to use a survey approach rather than a checklist in the assessment section. Further adjustments to scoring criteria were made in the assessment section and the first author presented a number of design options to the project leaders.

An analysis of 1997 to 1999 AA and EEO programs in the state was used as basis for new survey questions and implementation procedures for the second meeting in August. The MDQF focus group approved the four stage approach, reduced and refined the survey questions, and suggested guidelines for profile interpretation.

The first author finalised the tool ‘Managing Diversity, Self Assessment strategy’ to include descriptions of evolution to a diversity sensitive organisation and four phases of the managing diversity strategy. In the assessment section, the school leadership team has guidelines on using the tool to assess the school’s managing diversity benchmarks, and to interpret this profile. In the development plan section, the user is guided in choosing diversity interventions and strategies to improve a specific intervention are suggested. In the third section a checklist for steps in implementation is provided and recommendations for monitoring and improvement are noted in section four.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework for this instrument and these self-assessment strategies should be tested in a small convenience sample of rural, urban, state, special and private schools. This could deliver a tested, refined framework and tool for self-assessment of diversity management strategies that is applicable and accepted by the Victorian school community.

The categories of diversity interventions that are currently used by schools should be assessed as well as what implementation steps are evolving and what are leaders’ preferences for future managing diversity interventions in a representative sample of schools. This could lead to a quantitative report on benchmarks, diversity interventions and implementation steps in Victorian schools or public sector workplaces.

Interviews with leadership teams should be held to monitor their progress with implementation of managing diversity. This could result in case studies for cross-case analysis to develop theory. Some case studies could emerge that could be used for training of future leaders in self-assessment of managing diversity strategies. The outcome should be to evaluate the effectiveness of self-assessment and implementation strategies for managing diversity in schools and public sector workplaces that can be adapted for other work contexts. New conceptual models of managing diversity could be derived from this data.

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