

Unity in Diversity The Ethical Advantage

■ Subhash Menon

The world as we know has changed. Take business dynamics, competition, a highly 'connected' millennial workforce with rising expectations and the fact that business success and employee happiness are completely entangled with each other, you have one potent mixture. Again, if you are looking at diversity and ethics as two separate aspects, think again.

Diversity, in the present professional context, has a very different meaning than it might have had a couple of decades ago. 'Diversity at work' no longer limits itself to ethnicity, race, community, gender or even compliance with legal regulations. It derives a much deeper meaning in today's HR world, which now encompasses 'values'. Having a diverse environment is now about asserting the diversity of thoughts.

A *Forbes* study stated, "Diversity is crucial for fostering innovation in the workplace." With different people from different backgrounds come different attitudes, different perspectives and thus also some deeper insights. And that's where out-of-the-box ideas come from. The diversity in thoughts is what distinguishes an organisation's identity and brand value from others.

Taking diversity into account is, rather, a part of an organisation's ethical responsibility. Organisations are not just ethically or morally responsible for their workforce but also have a legal responsibility to operate in a manner that abides by the law and its prohibitions. Respecting its employees and being fair to them at every level, taking into consideration employee identity and background is also one of the moral obligations every company has.

While 'Diversity' refers to the characteristics of every individual which distinguishes him/her from others, these diverse characteristics could be derived from personal or social

experiences. The Intelligence Unit of *The Economist* mentions that the diversity at work takes into consideration what motivates someone to join a company, embody organisational passions and maintaining productivity for a longer period of time.

In this age of millennialism, we have a technologically diverse category of employees. On one hand, we have the new set which has grown with evolving technological extravaganza and on the other, we have the senior, experienced players who may not be able to easily gel with the constantly changing mechanisation. Binding the traditional to the contemporary – despite differences in their thinking perspectives, behavioural patterns and approach towards work and life makes maintaining the integrity of the organisation a greater task.

Also, we cannot overlook the fact that managing diversity in an organisation is equally both – a challenge as well as an opportunity for the management. Take for example, the differently-abled. Don't they deserve an equal opportunity in a workplace that may not be designed keeping their challenges in mind? It is a challenge because having a diverse working environment implies that the organisation needs to develop a fostering cultural environment which values differences and maximises the potential of all employees. Yes, Organisations are

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open, but there is a lot yet to be done. Diversity at work also strives to make people of all socio-economic backgrounds feel comfortable working within the organisation. It promotes equal opportunities amongst all employees and all solely on the basis of merit.

When you look at diversity from a very different perspective – as an asset or as something which is desirable as well as beneficial – you will realise that it is an abstract painting which enables employees to retain their individuality while they collectively contribute to the business. From this perspective, you can also see that valuing diversity and creating appropriate action plans, mirrors your openness as a company. It reflects fun, the desire to be different and can even be a cause for celebrating while discovering how everyone can join together to



create more as a united team than anyone can on their own.

Realising the importance of diversity and its ethical connect was the easy part. Sometimes, the greater challenge is in figuring out how to execute it. This is where a lot of companies struggle. The first step to this solution comes in identifying the various levels and dimensions of diversity. From the socio-economic backgrounds to geographical origins, religious beliefs, marital status and physical appearances, there are various elements that can have influence on company programmes and policies. But which of these elements deserve how much importance becomes a part of the organisation's ethical concern? That is something to be seen.

I have often heard young HR professionals ask me if one can create a truly 'un-biased' company policy. After all, can you really keep everyone happy? Isn't launching an employee initiative that benefits 90 percent of your employee strength good enough? There is only one answer. It is *not* ok. That's what we are here for. To ensure this does not happen.

It is, therefore, important that organisations take action on diversity with tenacity and speed rather than ignore it for what may otherwise seem to be the greater good.

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