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Black Lecturers Matter: Exploring the Views of BAME Staff in Education on Organisational Culture and Opportunities for Black Staff in Promotion to Higher Positions

Abstract

Legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 has ensured that considerable progress has been made in tackling discrimination in relation to the 8 protected characteristics that are defined in law. UK HEIs are well-versed in monitoring the diversity of their workforce and ensuring that recruitment is compliant with the legislation. However as HEIs become more diverse, we need to ensure that 'cultural differences' and 'misunderstandings', do not become barriers to genuine equality of opportunity for BAME staff. This small-scale research project explores these questions with BAME staff working in higher education in the UK. Implications for leaders and managers and Human Resources professionals are considered.

Keywords: culture, diversity, perception, people, minority groups, education, business, impact, solution

Introduction

Organisational culture and equality of opportunity

The main purpose of this paper is to critically analyse and evaluate the context of organisational culture and perception, the link to leadership and managerial roles to instil a conducive working environment to emulate by all working in an organisation. The understanding of cultural differences in business operation can enhance business performance in the context of working with our customers and colleagues. The global business operations are moderated by environmental variables such as culture, language, laws, misinterpretation and perceptions of which cultural diversity is one of the most pronounced challenges faced in business operations hence requires leaders and management intervention. Leaders and managers in business have roles to play to instil a conducive culture that can lead to employee motivation. The current business environment is becoming much modernised, unpredictable, and competitive and challenging, hence the need to adapt a positive culture will help motivate people that we do business and work with globally. The leaders and managers have important role to play to instil a conducive cultural environment.

Culture consists of shared thoughts; values and beliefs shared amongst employees and plays a great role in our understating of the world of business and motivation. Cultural understanding is another challenge and important in a successful business. Culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and

transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181). Culture therefore can be very difficult to erase from human nature. Culture responds to changes in internal and external environment, new technology, new products, new customers, new personnel, introduction of new systems and new procedures, as well as macro social and political trend and therefore can affect what we do and how we perceive things around us (Nworgu & Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2018). Spencer-Oatey (2008, p. 3), defines "Culture as a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour, perception and can lead to misinterpretation or misrepresentation of people based on interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour".

Cultural understanding is obviously an issue that needs addressing as not providing the necessary support can frustrate people, staff and customers that interact with us in doing a business or working together. Some of the key factors that can impact on culture is misinterpretation, wrong perceptions and language barriers being major issues – understanding specific language and cultural needs (Bamford, 2008). This obviously imposes a big challenge to leaders and managers of an organisation, hence the need to find effective strategies to re-enforce cultural acceptance to cater for the diverse group of people that we do business with and interact with globally of which leaders and managers and HR have big role to play to accommodate all doing business with us to be successful.

Representation of BAME staff in UK higher education

A total of 1.9% of all academic staff employed in UK HE is Black while 3.7% of non-academic staff is Black. Across both groups the percentage of staff employed in HE who are Black is a little over 2.5%. To put this into context, around 3.3% of the UK population is Black. As seniority increases the issue of a lack of diversity increases. In 2018/19 there were 535 staff who were employed as academic managers, directors or senior officials across British universities. 475 of these were White, 25 Asian, mixed or other ethnicity, and none Black. The remaining 35 were of unknown ethnicity. Less than 1% of the professors employed at UK universities are Black and few British universities employ more than two Black professors (Ijoyemi, 2021).

In July 2020, 300 academics and students wrote an open letter criticising universities for their "tokenistic and superficial" support for the BLM movement given their poor record on tackling institutional racism. In the letter they said the sector had significantly underestimated the prevalence of racism and had failed to address its "systemic and structural nature". Prof David Richardson, chair of Universities UK's advisory group on stamping out racial harassment on campuses and vice-chancellor of University of East Anglia, said there was evidence of systemic issues that disproportionally affect students from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Speaking on BBC Three's documentary *Is Uni Racist?* He said: "There's mixed experiences, but many aren't good. There is a lot of evidence that points towards universities perpetuating systemic racism, being institutionally racist and I have acknowledged that on behalf of the sector."

On the one hand, UK HEIs state that they heavily committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion for both students and staff. On the other hand, BAME staffs are underrepresented within higher levels of academia and of the senior management of universities. The aim of this research is to explore why this might still be an issue in education particularly at this changing world with focus on globalisation, inclusive education and equal opportunities for all regardless of your age, race, disability and gender preached equalities. This small scale research sought to ask BAME staff in UK HEIs about their experiences at the present time and whether there has being changes in their recruitment and selection to higher positions in education.

Literature

Culture refers to the fundamental beliefs, philosophies, expectations, assumptions, norms, written and unwritten rules and regulations that guide our ways of interactions that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organisation (Cancialosi, 2017). It is about how we perceive things around us and can lead to misinterpretation of a person's character or behaviour which can have a drastic effect on those affected. Culture has a link to perception and subject to misinterpretation of character if not understood.

Perception is another contributor of cultural understanding as the organisational culture can be highly affected by the values prioritised in its operations centred on the sense of working and general behaviours amongst the workers and others that are part of the organisation. The way employees are perceived, treated and motivated in organisation can drive their moral and it is a major aspect that controls their perception and the effectiveness, therefore, understanding this aspect of human being in our business can help trust and create stability at work place or business which can impact on organisational culture (Al-Tit, 2016).

The culture of an organisation needs to be understood by leaders and managers and employees in general. The concept of organisational culture has many interpretations and some of the definitions have claimed that organisational culture to be a set of knowledge acquired by a group of people after solving a problem of adaptation to the external and internal environment (Schein, 1993) and consists of three layers namely, artefacts, values and behaviours of the organisation and assumptions (Schein & Schein, 2016, pp. 6-7). Culture is defined by Hofstede and Minkov as a collective phenomenon that comprises a set of unwritten rules acquired from the social environment of a group, distinguishing one group from another and seen as consisting of different layers and levels, namely, symbols, heroes, rituals and values (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, pp. 7-8). According to Mullins (2006), organisational culture is specific and denotes certain behaviour and attitudes of employees towards the organisation which makes them unique. It could be represented as the way a company works known as the entire organisational behaviour (Armstrong, 2009, p. 288).

It is noted in research that a strong and positive organisational culture is important to sustain the organisation and can increases performance (Nworgu & Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2018), also can be seen from employee, motivation and commitment to their duties and responsibilities. In a negative cultural driven environment, there is always tension and resistance to changes in working condition whereas in a positive cultural driven environment, there is presence of active involvement in what we do hence leading to positive attitudes to work by those in the organisation, employees or those involved to gain a sense of belonging, loyal and commit to work ethics (Mullins, 2006).

Organisational culture influences many aspects of the organisation ranging from top management to bottom (Garcia Martinez et al., 2016), as most organisations fail to maintain cultural supports for diversity in the workplace hence leading to cultural gap. Instilling a positive organisational culture influences employee smooth relationships and interaction (Evans, 2001), therefore building a positive culture can help resolve some of the issues and problems faced in organisation particularly with the minority groups that seem to be marginalised or discriminated at in organisations operating both national and international. Corporate culture has to present positive image as it carries the values, behaviour and practices (Kummerow & Kirby, 2013) that make them whom they are and what they do. If presented wrongly, it will scare customers and stakeholders, including the employees as negative culture can have a devastating effect on organisational performance.

What are the moderators of organisational culture?

When good people are misinterpreted and presented in a wrong way, it can have a drastic impact on their business and work. Misinterpretation can also be as a result of cultural misunderstanding, the way we do things, selfishness, hate; malicious gossip which can lead to misinterpretation of character resulting from cultural attributes. The language we speak can lead to misinterpretation; the body language of people can be misconstrued due to barriers in communication. The degree of organisational hierarchy has a big impact and must be maintained to avoid negative impact in the business operations with notion of growth.

How does the role of leadership and management impact organizational culture and implication for BAME staff in recruitment and selection to higher positions in education?

The core values of any organisation start with its leaders and their leadership style. Therefore the ability of leaders in shaping the culture of the organisation helps to create a heathy working environment. Understanding the culture of the organisation helps the employees to understand what is expected in relation to what is accepted and not accepted in relation to the organisational values, assumptions and practices (Sims, 2002). Working in an environment of uniformity in organisational value can lead to emerging strong organisational, hence it is vital for the leaders of any organisation to ensure consistency in our approach to working with people in a culturally diverse environment.

Appreciation of employee commitment to organisation complying with organisation standards and ethics in their business operations is very vital in instilling a conducive working culture, hence defining a culture to monitor and reward good employee performance, which could be done through training and development of skills, recruitment and selection and complying with the organisational ethos (Craig, 2018) and fairness.

Methodology

The study has used WhatsApp interviews to approach a small group of respondents who volunteered to participant in the interview of which work in education leadership and management or have their own education related business. The focus was to find out what they think about organisational culture, misinterpretation and perceptions and

impact on their jobs or business. The findings of research were relevant to compare and contrast with the literature, also inform conclusion that organisational culture can have either negative or positive impact and subject to misinterpretation and perception that can affect business performance if ignored by leaders and managers of organisation.

Findings and discussion

A selection of responses is shared below, before we discuss the themes arising from the responses as a whole.

What is your understanding of culture and diversity and impact on your jobs?

Culture is the programming of mind, the belief and values attached to things and it is very difficult to change the way you do things and see things. Diversity on the other hand is working with different sets of people with different culture, ethic group and countries comprising male or female and categorised as black, white and Asian to mention a few. Culture is your religion and ethos that can be complex in organisational setting and when misunderstood, can lead to either positive or negative outcome. (AO)

The culture is how you see things around you, the values attached and belief that you cannot depart from or get rid of overnight regardless whom you interact with or work for, it is in every member of the organisation or society and therefore recognising the positive or negative impact on people, the institution and people around us is very important. Having a positive culture has good effect in working environment or business and interacting with people regardless of where they come from is the only way forward to creating a positive culture. Creating a positive culture that does not discriminate against certain group of people can create a strong culture. (AS)

I see culture as something that is part of you and does not leave you. It could be something that you are born with in case of religion that you practice, following what you do at work and how you perceive things around you. It is the value attached to way of life and what you do and how you do it. We are working in a diverse global world interacting with different people at work, on holiday and in business, we must recognise that they are not the same, don't thing the same, speak differently, can perceive things right or wrong and subject to misinterpretation. It can seriously impact on organisational performance if presented negative by people that we interact with in our day to day activities or in business. Educating people about the difference in diversity and working together is the key to understanding. (UA)

Everyone should be responsible for creating a positive working cultural environment. I remember when I first came to the UK to work; language was a barrier as I spoke French. It was embarrassing to me that I made mistake in everyone sentence made. My boss was very understanding. He called me into the office one day and asked me if I needed extra English class which he paid for me. I took the advantage and here we are today. The training he offered as a manager did help me to speak better. He realised the language barrier affecting my job and he helped to resolve the problem through extra training. You can imagine how I would have felt if he did not realise the barrier to doing effective job. Within 6 months of my training, my performance increased and our department had the best results. (SU)

How do you see the promotion in your job in regard to your ethnicity?

Well, I am a black British and must admit that promotion of black people in education is very difficult in higher positions such as the Heads of Departments, Deans and Vice Chancellors. For me, it is not something that will change in my generation because it is there and all affected have accepted to live with it. You live with it because you can't complain to anyone; HR will not support you if you complain, you are seen as a trouble maker and could be isolated or being avoided for fighting for equality. I feel that it is

the culture of both HE and FE or education institution in general and not sure who id there to ensure fairness in recruitment and selection to ensure inclusion of all in hierarchy. Not in my generation. Think of Covid period, which were manly the frontline workers BAME Staff, yet when it comes to recognition and promotion to higher positions, they are the least. (OJ)

Have you been treated differently at work due to your cultural diversity?

Not sure if it is me alone or what I see happen to other people. Being black maybe more pronounced and does make you think about your colour or race. We get treated differently for sure but most foreigners experience racism in education when it comes to promotion opportunities. However, for black community, it is no more pronounced. (SS)

Do you think that the University is given black female staff opportunity to progress?

Since working in this University, the answer is no. However, I am not sure if they are applying because, some give up with the impression that the jobs will not be given to them which is true in most cases. However, we have few of the male blacks in the management team. More is needed from HR to give opportunities to more female black lecturers to move on to management positions particularly those who have being in the system for a long time. (SU)

How are you supported in your research and development activities coming from black British Background?

Nothing there for research and development opportunities for some minority groups, an experience for me as a Black person was very unbelievable. I told my colleague about a conference in Europe which we both applied for research funding that is available to all staff. It was surprising that mine was not approved and but they approved it for my colleague who secretly told me that hers was approved. I paid for myself and yet travelled with a colleague whom everything was paid for and yet we travelled together. This is why you see how coming from black ethnic minority can have impact on staff. I see it sometimes as a negative culture of education that can affect your progression. (SA)

Do you think that cultural diversity and inclusive in education in hierarchy could be achievable?

Nothing is impossible; it also depends on the environment, situation, strategies in place and those involved in managing cultural change and diversity inclusion. The first thing is the education of mind-set, making people realise their mistake on how they attach negativity to people believed him, when he realised this, he stopped. This is a way to change the mid-set of living on people. (BK)

Conclusion

This small scale research found that BAME staffs have experienced barriers to their progression in UK universities/colleges. Respondents also shared direct experiences where they felt they had been treated less favourably than white colleagues when it came to development opportunities and recruitment and selection for higher positions. The general view was that it will take a long time to turn the situation around and see real equality of opportunity and outcomes for BAME staff. However, respondents also spoke positively about their treatment and support from individual colleagues.

Although based on a small sample size, this exploratory work confirms that organisational culture can play a crucial role in improving the opportunities for BAME

staff in. Leaders and managers, supported by HR teams (which themselves should be representative), should seek the views and experiences of BAME staff and allow honest conversations about the issues. Educational leaders should look to other sectors where inclusion efforts have been more successful to identify lessons and transferable measures. A limitation of the research was that some staffs were reluctant to participate due to their busy workload, fear and sensitive nature of the research.

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