

## Managing workforce diversity in South African schools

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*An attempt is made to assess the effect of human resource diversity in South Africa and provide strategies for managing such diverse institutions. A pilot study using questionnaires was conducted to determine the circumstances surrounding workforce diversity in a number of educational institutions. Thereafter, qualitative interviews provided in-depth perspectives on issues such as individualism vs. collectivism, gender, assumptions, attitudes and affirmative action measures. The data emerging from the investigation provided clear guidelines for handling diversity in institutions and suggest the necessity for creating an understanding and recognition of differences, providing for reward and support and for developing a sound diversity management strategy.*

### Introduction

"We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the world of others when we don't even know they exist" (Delpit, 1993).

Continuing changes, transformational dynamics and evolution in education will remain a reality for the foreseeable future, and related to these changes are the uniqueness of the South African fabric and its educational mosaic. This interrelatedness between changes and the uniqueness of a country's educational environment suggests that research on issues emerging from such a relationship will continue unceasingly. This implies that education in South Africa has to be prepared, amongst other things, to facilitate diversity to ensure the effective functioning of its institutions. The problem is that managers have to know how to plan for and handle such issues. It is therefore important that various contemporary issues, such as diversity, are identified and researched timeously.

Before rational discourse can take place, the role of managers within the education sector needs to be recognised because these managers have to absorb, deal with and implement the changes in the environment. These changes are usually issues that lead people towards questioning and making paradigm shifts, and are probably the hardest and most challenging tasks. In order to cope with these challenges in the education system, it is necessary to equip individuals to handle critical issues that cross their paths. This necessitates a review of research findings on the following:

- The impact of human resource diversity on educational institutions in South Africa; and
- strategies for the management of workforce diversity.

### Research design

Grounding research was undertaken in educational institutions with a diverse staff composition to unravel the issues at stake in an accurate and critical manner, and to provide guidelines for development.

Before the issue of diversity management in educational institutions in South Africa could be probed, it was necessary to determine the scope of diversity in the selected institutions, and whether diversity is truly a critical issue that needs to be addressed, because the state of diversity in South African education has been largely unexamined thus far. It was therefore neces-

sary to conduct a pilot study to provide an overview of the situation in these educational institutions. Questionnaires were distributed randomly to 300 educators in schools and in institutions for Further Education and Training in four of the nine provinces in the country. (For the purposes of this study both the schools and the institutions for Further Education and Training will be referred to as educational institutions.) These questionnaires were aimed at the following: to determine the number of participants who were exposed to a diverse workforce situation with regard to race and gender; whether they were driven by collectivistic or individualistic values; to ascertain whether stereotyping, prejudices and biases still existed; to investigate whether exposure to others had had an influence on how the participants viewed other groups; and to judge whether affirmative action had had an impact on their careers. The respondents were representative of the diverse racial and cultural composition of the population, including white (15%), coloured (3%), black (80%) and Asian (2%) educators and managers. The sample was made up of 65% female and 35% male, which approximately reflects the male/female educator composition in South Africa and worldwide. The data obtained from the pilot study are reviewed when the relevant issues are discussed. Because the questionnaires were personally distributed among the participants for completion and returned again to the researcher, a 100% response rate was obtained.

The pilot study was followed by a qualitative investigation. A qualitative method was used because diversity is a very sensitive issue and it was necessary to "get under the skin" (Duff, 1992:87) of people in diverse educational institutions. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants to obtain first-hand evidence of their experiences, problems and need for empowerment. The participants were a stratified selection from the group that had been involved in the pilot study. For pragmatic considerations, it was decided not to conduct more than 12 interviews, but after 10 interviews theoretical saturation was reached. The 10 participants were from various racial, cultural, gender, language and religious groups and were all active employees of South African educational institutions. Four of the 10 participants are currently employed as school principals. Although the data from the qualitative investigation are too extensive to report within the limited scope of this reading, the data relevant to the issues under discussion will be reported.

Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher obtained each participant's permission to record his/her response, and at the same time assured him/her of the confidentiality of his/her identity. The interviews were conducted in surroundings familiar to the participants in order to put them at their ease. Consequently, most of the interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, with the researcher playing only a facilitating role, focusing on the participants as the main sources of information. The researcher wanted "the object to speak for itself" (Smaling, 1994:17) by focusing on the participants' perceptual and experiential thought patterns, negating the elusive positivistic "scientific neutrality".

The following overarching open-ended questions were posed to each participant, namely: "How do you experience the diverse staff composition in which you are working? Did it in any way influence your own views of life? Do you have particular needs regarding the way diversity should be handled in the institution?"

The interviews were recorded, while some field notes were taken. The exact words were later transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded and analysed according to the themes that arose from the data (Strauss, 1987:55-57; Miles & Huberman, 1984:208-231). After the main themes had been identified and coded, an axial coding was done where data were organised by

means of related themes and sub-themes. Miles and Huberman's (1984:211-213) "matrix display and examination" was used to reveal patterns in the data. Thereafter, the repetition of patterns and evidence relevant to the topic were identified in order to come to relevant conclusions — Miles and Huberman (1984) call this step "conclusion drawing and verification".

In this research process it was necessary to ensure reliability, as far as possible, by attempting to eliminate causal errors that could influence the results. The following measures were taken:

- Data and method triangulation where literature reviews, interviews and questionnaires were used to obtain data on the issue of diversity.
- Member checks whereby contradictory information was referred back to the participants for further clarification.
- The preservation of all data, notes and tapes for auditing purposes.

The researcher attempted to limit random errors while, at the same time, obtaining a deeper understanding of the object of the research. Validity was enhanced by the following:

- Striving towards a representative investigation by involving participants from diverse backgrounds.
- Gathering data until the point of theoretical saturation was reached. Here the Hermeneutical circle was applied (Guba & Lincoln, 1989:152).
- Comparing the data in the process of finding differences and similarities, while at the same time searching for theory driven data.

The above measures were applied to protect the researcher's work from suffering from own biases and limitations. A synthesis of the data will therefore be reported for the purposes of this article.

### **The impact of workforce diversity on educational institutions in South Africa**

An important and broad-based challenge facing organisations is that of adapting to people who are different. The term used to describe this challenge is workforce diversity. Workforce diversity differs from globalisation as it addresses differences among people within given countries, whereas globalisation focuses on the differences of people from different countries (Robbins, 2003:11).

Workforce diversity means that organisations are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, but it also includes diversity in terms of age, the disabled, and people with varied sexual orientations. The issue of diversity is not only limited to South Africa, but is also applicable to numerous other countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan and European countries. Because of the limited scope of this article, the focus will be on race/culture and gender in educational institutions in South Africa. The pilot study revealed that all the respondents were working in gender diverse institutions and that 96% of them were working in racially and/or culturally diverse institutions. From the empirical investigation, the following themes emerged.

#### **Individualism vs. collectivism**

In South Africa a concept such as individualism vs. collectivism has become a critical issue as the organisational culture is cast in a eurocentric mould (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2000:396), revealing an individualistic characteristic if the group is predominantly white. In contrast to individua-

lism, black people largely reveal an afrocentric approach, a communalistic orientation, believing that every person is very much part of the social fabric and that each person needs to find his/her own place in the social structure, becoming subordinate to the social needs of the group as a whole (Koopman, 1994:119). Central to this afrocentric management is the term, *Ubuntu*, which means, "I am because we are". Collectivism is opposed to individualism and intensive competitiveness, and places great emphasis on concern for people and working for the common good (Williams & Green, 1994:65).

Hofstede (1980) conducted one of the primary studies in cultural comparisons by referring to individualism and collectivism as the extent to which people think and act as individuals, based on their own self-determination, as opposed to confronting or adhering to the ways of a group of people. The western cultures are regarded as being more individualistic than the eastern and African cultures (Williams & Green, 1994:64). In individualistic cultures, great emphasis is placed on following one's own convictions, taking one's own needs into account, placing a priority on "doing one's own thing" and being independent of others.

The extent to which culture one subscribes — individualistic or collectivistic — will influence one's relationships with others, and will determine the level of emotional dependency group members have on one another. This may even determine whether rewards are allocated individually or to groups.

The group of educators targeted for this investigation, revealed the information presented in Table 1.

There appeared to be a fairly even distribution between the individualistic and collectivistic approach among the participants, which implied that institutions had a major responsibility to account for both these value systems.

**Table 1** Participants in racially and culturally diverse institutions and their individualistic/collectivistic value systems

		Number of respondents	%	N
1.1	Participants working in a diverse education environment with regard to race and ethnic culture	288	96.0	300
1.2	Participants experiencing stereotyping, bias and prejudice with regard to race and related culture in their work environment	106	36.8	288
1.3	Participants valuing the following:			
1.3.1	The individual	140	46.6	300
1.3.2	The group	160	53.3	300

Hofstede (1980) found that those who subscribe to an individualistic culture tend to:

- show greater independence from their employment organisation;
- strongly defend their personal or leisure time;
- demand more freedom and scope in their jobs;
- want more autonomy in their jobs;
- prefer to make decisions individually, rather than collectively;

- pursue their own needs and ambitions with less regard for others' needs;
- acknowledge that they are responsible for looking after themselves;
- show interest in individual reward schemes, and
- find individual objectives more appealing, such as achieving freedom and autonomy in making decisions, earning promotion and pay increases.

Those who subscribe to a collectivistic culture tend to:

- prefer to work for large organisations;
- take others into account more often and to a larger extent;
- prefer group decisions;
- consider mostly what is good for the group;
- believe that if they help the group, the group will look after them;
- find individual reward systems unacceptable, as they threaten their core values and beliefs, preferring a scheme that rewards the group or team performance or an equal distribution of rewards amongst all members of the group, and
- want to carry their whole team with them to achieve organisational objectives, getting their whole group's views across and their needs met.

During the interviews certain opinions were expressed and are shown as quotations, which served as a basis for the conclusions which follow.

- *When I started to work with white people, I found it difficult to understand the way they approach things. They have rather fixed ideas about things and are not easily influenced by what the majority of the staff feels.*
- *What I still find difficult to understand about black people is that they always want to consult the others before they come to a decision. Maybe we should also try to involve others to a greater extent, but it doesn't always work that way — sometimes one just has to take certain decisions immediately.*
- *Having a diverse staff compelled me to think about how I tend to approach things. I realized that there are different ways of doing things and that my way is not necessarily the right or the best way.*
- *I am convinced that principals should be thoroughly trained before they take up their posts. Handling a diversified group is not easy. I have made so many mistakes and I wish I had known what I now know when I started.*
- *When I become confused, I try to think that we all have the learners' best interests at heart, and that if we don't support one another, we are not going to deliver good work.*

Managers therefore have to deal with these different perspectives in order to manage the diversity in their institutions. According to Swanepoel *et al.* (2000:397) this afrocentric approach forms a close parallel to transformational leadership where leaders work to create a climate and culture where each individual and group can achieve their full potential. In doing so, transformational leaders could facilitate collectivism in South African organisations, coming to terms with one another's differences, acknowledging them, putting them in perspective, and discovering and dealing with the strengths and weaknesses of different ideologies, in order to improve the aggregate potential of South African organisations, thus creating the best prospects of unity through diversity.

Educational institutions will therefore have to function in an entrepreneurial manner and bring about paradigm shifts in the process of cultivating a new, shared culture.

### Male/Female composition

The bulk of the pre-1980s workforce in the world were men, working full-time to support non-employed wives and their children. Now such employees are the true minorities in western countries. Currently 46% of the US labour force are women, and even regarding cultures, minority cultures and immigrants make up 23% (Robbins, 2003:11).

The South African National Baseline Survey, conducted in 2000 by the Department of Labour, found that men comprised 27% and women 23% of the total number of permanent employees. It is clear from the survey that gender inequities are narrowing (Department of Labour, 2000). Table 2 reveals the findings from this investigation regarding gender in educational institutions.

**Table 2** Participants in gender diverse institutions and their experiences regarding stereotyping, bias and prejudice

	Number of respondents	%	N
Participants working in a diverse education environment with regard to gender	294	98.0	300
Female participants experiencing stereotyping, bias and prejudice with regard to gender in their work environment	105	53.8	195

During the qualitative interviews, certain opinions were expressed by some of the female educators:

- *We are still being marginalised by not being included in important decision-making processes;*
- *Often offensive remarks are made about women, for example, that assemblies are there for women to parade at;*
- *The cooking and cleaning functions are still associated with the women staff members and when there are school functions, those are the only kinds of jobs that are allocated to us;*
- *Males feel inferior when women achieve something, which mostly hampers our will to perform well;*
- *Males do not easily accept the authority of females and then we are subject to sexist remarks such as: we are like men and that nobody wants to have anything to do with those types of women.*

The following remarks came from women who had been victims of stereotyping and unfair discrimination at a particular educational institution:

*Don't underestimate our intelligence.*

*Give us a fair chance to prove ourselves.*

*Don't shunt us around and don't yell at us.*

*Don't look down on us; give us the recognition we deserve.*

(translated from UVPERSU, 2002:13)

How do these experiences influence the institution? From the above, it is clear that prejudice is felt. Assuming that everyone is the same and that differences have no place at work is a form

of prejudice, which, at best, may be attributed to a lack of true acceptance, or at worst, assuming that everyone wants to be the same, but somehow started off wrongly. Diversity tension is often created because people feel that they are being marginalised or treated unfairly, and this signals that these problems have to be addressed (Niemann, 1994:44). When work is unfair, workers do not work hard, are far less committed to the organisation, and are less likely to be co-operative or helpful (Internet, 2004).

The qualitative investigation also revealed the following opinions:

- *When one doesn't feel included, one doesn't feel committed.*
- *I know principals tend to appoint people who are like them and in most cases they are males.*
- *'Suitably qualified' often means educators who act like them, dress like them, have the same reference and are of the same sex. So if you are different you don't easily become part of the team and that is very discouraging.*
- *Why can't we all just strive for the same goals, despite our differences in colour, sex, language or religion?*
- *I am a Departmental Head, but I always feel excluded when important decisions have to be made by the SMT (School Management Team). I know it is because I'm a woman. I wish we could rather get the necessary support from management.*

It is clear from research that an organisation, wanting to plug into the full potential and commitment of the people working for it, must realise that employees judge the fairness with which they are treated. Perceived unfairness could therefore affect people's orientation to the work environment, making them more likely to participate in conflict, resulting in less productive employees.

Educational institutions will have to create a work environment in which diversity is accepted, by providing employees with managers and supervisors who genuinely accept backgrounds and orientations different from their own. Such organisations will more likely to benefit from diversity, than to suffer because of it.

### Assumptions and attitudes

The more globally oriented economy and the changing labour pool have made it more likely that employees will be working with persons from more diverse backgrounds than ever before (Internet, 2003). The South African school system is now rapidly changing towards a complex mix of races, cultures, languages and sexual orientations. These changes have resulted in more diverse management teams and a more culturally diverse workforce. Management teams and employees have to change their attitudes regarding a range of issues, from racial and gender attitudes to attitudes about the disabled, in order to comply with South African legislation, and to adjust and effectively manage the different contexts in which institutions/organisations are presently operating. The education sector needs to invest in training to help reshape the attitudes of employees. Table 3 reveals that people develop a better understanding of others when they come to know more about others.

During the qualitative investigation, the following views from the participants were expressed. These served as a basis for the conclusions thereafter.

- *Because we are such a diverse staff, the chances are good that others, in some way or another, will differ from you, but that gives you another perspective on certain matters, which can be very enriching.*

**Table 3** Developing understanding of differences in others

	Yes		No		Some understanding		N
3.1 Participants who have developed an understanding of other groups while working together	216	72%	33	11%	51	17%	300

- *In the beginning I was missing out on the nuances of the different cultures, but somewhere along the line, I picked that up, and that of course, also improved relationships.*
- *It would've been so much easier if we could have undergone some training so that the different groups could have understood one another better. I think the will to overcome our differences is very strong in South Africa and that helps us to succeed, because to get rid of prejudice is something that takes time.*
- *From a management point of view, handling diversity should be part of our training and should be part of our whole management strategy.*
- *I never realised that if one wants to account for the differences, one really has to make it part of the school's objectives and planned activities.*
- *I often get the feeling that white people tend to think we don't know what quality performance is. This is not so! Maybe if we could all spell out what we expect from the students and how we want the institution to be run, we might end up having more or less the same standards.*
- *The times that we worked together in groups meant so much to me. There I learnt how different people feel and think about things. I must say I have learnt a lot about how certain things should be done, but I like to believe that others have also learnt from me.*
- *I know that when I have diverse members in my project groups, it often takes longer to reach the end result, but the creativity and accommodative approach of the differences are amazing.*
- *Being newly appointed at a school with a very diverse staff composition, I sometimes feel very lonely. Some support, such as a mentor, could have been valuable and would've helped me to learn the ropes and the finer details of the functioning of the school.*

It is evident that people learn to value differences and increase their cross-cultural understanding if they are more exposed to these differences. When one starts to recognise one's own perceptual limitations and is able to appreciate the rich resources in the hearts and minds of other human beings, it contributes to one's personal development. When one starts to value differences, then those differences will add to one's own knowledge and understanding of reality. It is specifically the differences that arise from diversity that could be the sources of creating new, exciting forms of life — creating an environment that is truly fulfilling for each person; an environment that nurtures the self-esteem, and self-worth of each person; that creates opportunities for each to mature into independence and then gradually into interdependence (Covey, 1992a:263). Peters (1997:47) goes even further and says that, unless there is diversity, there will not be much to select from, especially when it comes to adapting to a fast-changing world. This implies that new ideas arise from differences and that creativity comes from unlikely juxtapositions. Covey (1992a:277) regards the valuing of differences as

the essence of synergy, which implies that the focus should become the encouragement and management of diversity, as opposed to merely accommodating diversity. A company should therefore rather work at acquiring a unique identity, reinventing itself from the ground up — "upscaling" itself.

In order to "upscale" itself, an institution cannot impose a particular institutional culture on its people and then believe that it should work, because it may not take into account the cultural archetypes of the people in question. Consequently, managers will have to become increasingly more concerned with changing employee attitudes in order to reflect shifting perspectives on racial, gender and other diversity issues. With the implementation of affirmative action and equal opportunity programmes, partly in response to employment equity legislation, changes are occurring in people's values and norms at work.

### Affirmative action measures

In South Africa "diversity" mostly refers to racial, gender and disability diversity. It is understandable that these components are highlighted, because these are the key variables in the diversity equation, due to the fact that people from these groups have previously been deprived of equal access to, and opportunities in, the labour market. On the grounds of the South African Constitution's Bill of Rights, diverse groups have to interact at all levels on an equal basis, which means that the need for greater understanding of differences and similarities will become more evident (Robbins, 2003:30). This implies affirmative action.

The concept of affirmative action originated from the earliest efforts against unfair discrimination, and refers to specific steps taken to promote equal opportunities for the designated groups, thereby transforming the present composition of employees so that they will become more representative of the designated groups. The Employment Equity Act (RSA, 1998: Article 15) stipulates that measures must be designed to ensure that suitably qualified people from designated groups have equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce.

In educational institutions it seems that affirmative action, in its basic form, does not have a major effect on people's career advancement (Table 4).

**Table 4** Experiences of participants with regard to affirmative action

	Number	%	N
4.1 Participants who have benefited from affirmative action measures			
4.1.1 White females	6	2.0	300
4.1.2 Black females	12	4.0	300
4.1.3 Black males	31	10.3	300
Total	49	16.3	300
4.2 Participants believing that affirmative action measures should entail specific aspects			
4.2.1 Affirmative action should always include merit	212	70.6	300
4.2.2 Affirmative action should remain part of the government policy for an indefinite period of time	156	52.0	300

From the above, it seems as if black people have benefited more from the affirmative action measures in South African education. It is also clear that black men are treated more favourably.

The recognition of merit in affirmative action appointments is clearly important to educationalists (70.6 %). During the interviews the respondents indicated that:

- ... *certain abilities and skills are needed to do the job;*
- ... *merit is necessary to perform well;*
- ... *experience, skills and qualifications should be the criteria;*
- ... *merit should be the only criterion;*
- ... *merit and hard work are necessary for appointments;*
- ... *we all desire to improve the level of education in our country and therefore good educators must be appointed.*

Whether affirmative action should remain part of government policy is another issue. Because 85% of the participants were from the designated groups, it is understandable that they would want affirmative action to be retained, but what is interesting to note, is the fact that only 52% were in favour of its retention, implying that quite a number of the participants were in favour of the termination of such measures.

As affirmative action is imposed by government upon educational institutions, the management teams should rather approach it positively and see it as an opportunity to bring about a renewed focus on developing tailor-made, quality employees for the organisation. McCabe (1996:36) refers to input-based affirmative actions such as providing bursaries for bright students from the designated groups, instead of competing in the market. Affirmative action may contribute to a fresh, new focus with innovative ideas and an entrepreneurial mindset. It might even bring about new values and "ways of doing things" in the institution, which could be essential in this dynamic age.

Two principals reacted as follows:

- *I must admit I've learnt a lot about others since our staff has become more diverse.*
- *Affirmative action definitely has its advantages and disadvantages, but to really get something positive out of it, it is extremely important to be truly positive and to try to manage it properly by means of programmes that sensitise and empower people. I think that in my school the mentoring system has delivered really positive results.*

Affirmative action could thus be a contributing factor in bringing about paradigm shifts, opening up new horizons and cultivating a new, shared culture, but then effective management is required.

Interviewees mentioned the following as reasons for terminating affirmative action measures:

- ... *otherwise our true abilities may never be truly recognised;*
- *It will always feel that one is appointed merely on grounds of one's race or gender;*
- *I prefer to be appointed because I'm the best;*
- *Affirmative action causes a lot of resistance and in that way, the different groups are never going to become a united team, sharing the same goals and objectives.*

Contrary to the above, Robbins (2003:12) feels that South Africa now has to put aside the melting-pot approach regarding differences in organisations, and the assumption that people who were regarded as different would want to assimilate, but rather to recognise that employees do not set aside their cultural values and lifestyle preferences when they come to work. The

challenge for institutions is to become more accommodating of diverse groups of people by addressing their different lifestyles, family needs and work styles. The melting-pot assumption is thus replaced by one that recognises and values differences, implying that the institution has to learn about and accept diversity, rather than merely applying affirmative action.

### **Synthesis of findings**

The research data revealed the deeper nuances of working together in diverse settings. It is evident that managers, as well as staff members, have to be empowered to perform effectively. As this research focused on identifying areas that have to be addressed when managing diversity in educational institutions, the following issues that emerged from the investigation will form the focus of the suggestions on how to approach the situation from a managerial viewpoint. The following needs have been identified:

- A better understanding of the different groups
- Recognising different views and ways
- Rewarding good work
- Support
- An effective management strategy and action plan
- Eradicating prejudices, stereotypes and biases
- Empowerment

### **Managing workforce diversity**

Now that the areas that need to be addressed have been identified, it is firstly necessary to view the effect of diversity on institutional management in general, and then to formulate specific management actions.

### **Implications for institutional management**

According to Williams and Green (1994:8) the workforce today is much less traditional and thus results in a tendency to ignore differences, But this also poses various dangers, such as reinforcing stereotypes, increasing lack of tolerance within the group, misunderstandings, frustrations, defensiveness, criticism and aggressive behaviour. Educators who are exposed to situations of diversity have to educate the learners and provide them with tools and an understanding of the future, but what if they are not equipped to do so? From the investigation it seems that educators lack the necessary skills which are required to equip learners for diversity and that in itself poses a challenge to the management of educational institutions.

It is in cases like these that there is a need for transformational leaders, who have to be creative in the identification of the sources of tension and are able to manage and redesign the system in order to address unproductive balances. Senge (1999:278-279) feels that people in an organisation have to work through diversity issues with responsibility, integrity and a willingness to do something about them. It is necessary that people learn to recognise their own power and capabilities, and set up groups and learning projects to help curb their innate resistance to differences.

Managers will need to shift their philosophy from treating everyone alike, to recognising differences and responding to those differences in ways that will ensure employee retention and greater productivity, while simultaneously avoiding discrimination. This shift includes, for instance, providing diversity training and revamping programmes to make these more "user

friendly" to all groups. The exploration of diversity can increase creativity and innovation as well as improve decision-making by providing different perspectives on problems. Robbins (1994:11) is convinced that, if diversity is not managed properly, it could potentially lead to a higher staff turn-over, difficulties in communication and increased interpersonal conflicts.

According to Hamel (2000:133) it is natural for people to focus on anything that is different, and it is particularly this natural inquisitiveness that should form the basis of training for diversity. The quality of an individual's experience can only be enhanced when working with someone who is different. Management has to create situations where people get to know others who are different from themselves (O'Mara, 1994:5). When diversity in a system has to be managed, it is therefore important that people start to value differences, which will add to their own knowledge and understanding of reality, and which act as sources of creating new and exciting forms of life. Valuing differences thus forms the essence of synergy, which implies that the focus should become the encouragement and management of diversity and not merely the accommodation thereof.

### Management actions

Although the approach to managing diversity may vary from one institution to another, the following key elements, addressing the needs that emerged from the research, should be integrated into any diversity management initiative:

- *Conduct self-evaluation to create a better understanding of others:* People should be encouraged to evaluate themselves and to confront ethnic, cultural and gender stereotypes they might hold (Robbins, 2003:31). People should realise the importance of knowing themselves as people with an implicit understanding of diversity and its related prejudices and inequalities (Internet, 2002). A person, therefore, has to recognise his/her own perceptual limitations and should be able to appreciate the rich resources in the hearts and minds of other human beings. When a person starts to value differences, then those differences can add to his/her own knowledge and understanding of reality (Williams, 2001:102). Covey (1992a:277) regards the valuing of differences as the essence of synergy — implying the management of similarities and differences.
- *Apply a balanced and an objective approach to ensure the recognition of differences:* All aspects of diversity should be recognised and emphasised (such as race, gender, religion) without reinforcing traditional biases and stereotypes. Robbins (2003:31) feels that panels with representatives from the diverse groups may be beneficial in the following ways: providing opportunities for people to explore their experiences and values, enabling them to see how others might differ from their experiences and values, and helping them realise that those differences are real and valid. When working co-operatively, learning takes place and a better understanding of diversity is created (Internet, 2002). Include both eurocentric and afrocentric strengths in the institution. Extract the best management tools from the groups, thereby ensuring a representative variety, the strength of which will help South Africa to compete in a highly competitive world. Management should work towards reconciling individualistic and collectivistic value systems, rather than working towards institutional and individual change. Institutions that provide for an ongoing cultural awareness and diversity training will be building capacity to accept and work with the working population at hand.
- *Reward good work:* The performance agreement should be reinforced by the organi-

sational structure and system to stand the test of time. It is therefore necessary to involve the staff members of the institution in setting the standards or criteria for acceptable and exceptional performance. A lack of a uniform set of criteria and an overall vision may lead to a breakdown in the organisational culture of the institution.

- *Provide substantial support:* An important success factor for diversity initiatives is the commitment of top management. The institution must consequently take a stance on diversity. Organisations that have successfully adopted diversity programmes have strong support from top management and have placed a high priority on diversity in their objective setting. Diversity success is achieved by management attendance at training events, long-term evaluation of management results, and managerial rewards for increasing diversity.

It is important to establish various support structures to operationalise the management of diversity, such as a diversity steering group (made up of diverse individuals, representing groups identified by the diversity audit), diversity project teams (utilising project management principles) and mentors to assist and support new appointments.

Team building will strengthen the support system, as teamwork utilises high-interaction group activities and increases trust and openness among staff members. The participants should be divided into teams or subgroups, making the membership of each small group as diverse as possible. Allow leaders to ask how aspects such as marginalisation affect the overall competencies and capabilities of the institution, and what could be done to equip staff to handle questions about rank, power, privilege and prejudice.

- *Integrate diversity into management strategy:* Diversity management must be implemented as a proactive measure and strategy to enhance institutional/organisational performance. Such a strategy should form part of the institution/organisation's employment equity plan in order to create an environment conducive to diversity and employment equity implementation, by
  - *Conducting a diversity needs assessment:* The particular needs of the institution must be identified by using scientific needs analysis instruments such as diversity audits and focus group investigations. Audits will enable the institution to define and examine the needs of its workforce, thereby allowing staff to participate in an early stage of strategy development, and provide a baseline to measure ongoing progress. Such an audit will also facilitate the process of tailoring the strategy to meet the specific needs of the institution/organisation.

It is important to create an environment that is truly fulfilling for each person, that nurtures the self-esteem and self-worth of each person, and that creates opportunities for all to mature into independence (Robbins, 2003:32). A diversity-needs identification will also contribute to the identification of prevailing stereotyping, bias, prejudice and assumptions. As all staff members will participate, different perspectives will emerge, and a climate of openness and co-operation can be established.

- *Developing a shared vision:* An institution should work on "upscaling" itself and that could be done by developing a shared vision and setting organisational goals — there must be an "I understand and I am committed because it's a win for me too" — approach.

Management should focus on cultivating team spirit by enhancing participation

and consensus. Management should go heavy on guidelines and light on procedures, so that, as circumstances change, people in the institution have the flexibility to function, while exercising their own initiatives.

- *Compiling an action plan:* During a diversity session participants should be encouraged to develop action plans. Such action plans must be specific in terms of planned activities, and how the plans can be maintained, reinforced, monitored and evaluated. Here project teams can produce project plans for implementation and submit them to the Diversity Steering Group for approval.

Decisions as to how to manage affirmative action in the institution should also form part of the action plan. Whether affirmative action is going to be the mere application of measures for the sake of it, or whether it is going to be a movement beyond tolerance to true acceptance, is important. However, the most important aspect should not be that management reflects the ethnicity and sex of the population, but rather that staff members are supervised and empowered to perform successfully, and that equality and acceptance is part of their working relationships.

- *Monitoring and evaluating:* The diversity strategy should be monitored on a continuous basis in order to identify successes, shortcomings and areas of improvement and modification. Any changes in training should occur only after consultation with all stakeholders, and should be communicated to all employees. According to Robbins (2003:31) the most important form of evaluation is the quantifiable impact the strategy has in terms of performance and results. It is thus necessary to monitor and evaluate the process continuously, creating an atmosphere of giving and accepting feedback in a non-defensive manner.

- *Empower the staff to cope with diversity:* Workshops should be arranged to allow staff to participate in group discussions with representatives from diverse groups. They will be able to participate in activities that are designed to change attitudes, for instance, exercises in which they learn to realise what it is like to feel different. Through such exercises, the participants can experience what it feels like to be judged according to something over which they have no control.

Use two or more facilitators, provided that they are representative of race and gender. Guest speakers from minority groups will also enrich a diversity programme.

A study of diversity training by various authors (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2000:398; Senge, 1999:278-279; O'Mara, 1994:5; Covey, 1992a:207; 208; 303; Covey, 1992b:284) revealed that empowering programmes should include aspects such as:

- The identification and handling of stereotyping, bias, prejudice and assumptions.
- Assistance to learn about, understand and value differences.
- Diversity as a system change process.
- The movement towards institutional and individual change.
- Conflict management and problem-solving skills.

The above emphasises the fact that it is the coming together and merging of interests that are necessary to create synergy. Diverse people have to work together, and institutions should take care that the tension and conflict resulting from differences do not destroy the harmony and unity an institution seeks to achieve.

### Closing perspective

From the above discussion, it is clear that the way in which people interpret things, gives meaning to the world around them and that it is no easy task to change those perceptions. In South Africa, diversity is a given in contemporary educational institutions, but this manifestation of diversity must not be seen as a dividing factor, but rather as a source of innovation, new ideas and perspectives. If seen as a challenge and if the correct management actions are taken, diversity can be used to create an environment in which attitudes towards differences have changed, stereotypes have been addressed and all staff members feel safe so that effective education can take place. The possibility exists that problems can arise in schools where a lack of synergy exists, and staff members become focused on their cultural differences, rather than on their common goals.

Ultimately, the successful management of diversity implies the development of a strong school culture that values cultural differences, while at the same time aligns the staff towards the goals of the school and ensures that the talents of all the staff members are used optimally. Hofstede (1980) summarises the whole issue as follows: "The survival of mankind will depend on the ability of people who think differently to act together".

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