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The role of leadership in diversity



AMAKA ANOZIE Jan 25, 2021



leadership

... sometimes, bosses keep people at work for much longer hours than they actually need to be there. Therefore, after a while, a certain culture develops. You feel that

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While the above from Prof. Hakeem Belo-Osagie may not be directly linked to diversity, it is a challenge that leadership – these bosses – must confront. Prof. Belo-Osagie, chairman – FSDH Holdings/Senior Lecturer, Harvard Business school, was the keynote speaker at the Nigerian chapter of the Eight Annual International Humanistic Management Network conference themed ‘The role of leadership in advancing diversity in the workplace’ and organized by the Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in leadership and Ethics, Lagos Business School.

Diversity, according to the Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], is the collective mixture of differences and similarities that include, for example, individual and organisation characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, preferences and behaviours.

In the workplace, we have had enough of sterile lament from our leadership about not finding able diverse people to fit in organisations. As the Bible says, he who seeks, finds. Leaders must look for in order to find. As a leader, know that your organisation will be richer for having able diverse people working within the group. This is not just empty talk but something backed by research and the many success stories. One such story is the case of the United Bank for Africa under the leadership of Prof. Belo-Osagie. During his tenure as chairman of the bank, he ensured that the bank was the most ethnically diverse institution in Nigeria. The result was a shift in mentality of the staff. Working side by side with people from different parts of the country helped fizzle out their biases about the ‘other’, thus broadening their outlook. After a while, the dividing lines within the bank changed from ethnic – you are from the south, that’s why you act like this – to functional; people bonded with the diverse people in their teams and strove to out-perform other teams.

Besides ethnic diversity, Prof. Belo-Osagie also highlighted three areas of diversity,

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2. Gender diversity – this is very crucial in the workplace. A particular gender should not be limited to work in certain areas, for example, some workplaces limit women to the human resource department. Rather, gender diversity should cut across the entire gamut of activity. In fact, as research show, women tend to be more honest than men.

3. Lastly, diversity caused by a generational divide [age]. In the past, many got to positions of leadership at a very young age. What obtains more and more now is that the younger generation are barely given a chance to lead, to prove their worth.

Prof. Belo-Osagie's keynote speech was followed by a panel discussion led by three panellists and moderated by Enitan Ibrinke, Lawyer and Mentor, WISCAR, Nigeria. The panellists were Engr Charles Osezua, Chairman, Institute of Work and Family Integration; Hilda Kabushenga Kragha, Managing director, ROAM Africa Jobs; and Fabia Ogunmekan, Executive Secretary, WISCAR, Nigeria.

All three agreed that to put together a capable diverse team, it is important to bring objective data points such as competency tests and behaviour analysis to the hiring process. Biases, stereotypes, and other reductive forms of subjectivity must be left behind. Besides, objectivity ensures that the drive for diversity, the drive to mirror society in the workplace, does not lead to mediocrity. With standardized tests, you pick the capable people whether women or men, southerner or northerner and so on. Diversity and meritocracy are not mutually exclusive as talent is equally distributed. There is no genetic superiority across race, gender, tribe or religion.

Focusing on gender diversity, Fabia added inclusion, the flip side of diversity, to the discussion. Diversity and inclusion should go hand in hand. It is not enough to bring in the right diverse people. Leadership should provide the opportunities and build capacity so as to help staff, especially women, fit in. She commented that in both the public and private sector, there is gender parity at the entry level but this

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Both women and men face peculiar life pressures. Hilda's take was that women face a lot more pressure than men do; unfortunately, organisations' policy at the moment do not reflect these pressures. Thus, the woman comes to a point where she has to choose between advancement in her career and devotion to her family. What is needed is a shift in workplace culture and leadership style as 'trees die from the top'; the spirit of the organisation can favour or stifle not only gender but any kind of diversity. Also there is the need for workplaces to be more flexible. The 'new normal' created by the measures to curtail the pandemic has shown that working from elsewhere other than the office does not affect productivity. For example, a woman can have a longer maternity leave to care for her infant at home while still delivering on organisational targets.

Continuing the discussion on more women in top positions in the corporate world, Engr Charles Osezuwa emphasized the need for women to push more. True, there is a lot that can be done by policies and leadership, women however need to push for those policies to take effect in their organisations. In effect, the power is there but you have to reach for it. And this is the same for anyone who is different in their place of work whether because of religion, tribe, economic class and so on.

If you are the first of your 'kind / class' to get to a position, be a trailblazer. Know that you have the responsibility to conduct yourself in such a way that people are encouraged to hire others like you. But don't stop there. Help the human resource department of your organisation hire more people like you.

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