The Case for an Eclectic and Flexible Leadership Research Agenda: Dealing with Social Justice and Diversity in the 21st Century Workplace

El caso de una agenda de investigación sobre liderazgo ecléctica y flexible: Cómo abordar la justicia social y la diversidad en el lugar de trabajo del siglo XXI

Otto Federico von Feigenblatt
Ph.D, Keiser University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6033-6495, vonfeigenblatt@hotmail.com

Reginald Dennis Calderon
D.B.A., Keiser University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, decalderon@keiseruniversity.edu, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3292-4764

Theodore MacDonald
Ph.D, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts, tedmacdon@fas.harvard.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7625-4363

Abstract

The workplace is becoming increasingly diverse and therefore issues of social justice and inclusion have rise to the top of the list of concerns of many management teams. Nevertheless many managers find themselves at a loss in terms of understanding the implications of the international concern on issues of social justice. A holistic approach to diversity and social justice in the workplace requires an applied anthropological perspective as well as an interdisciplinary perspective. The present paper argues that managers and leaders in general can borrow some very simple and useful techniques from applied anthropology and education in order to foster a more inclusive and just workplace.

Resumen

El lugar de trabajo es cada vez más diverso y, por tanto, las cuestiones de justicia social e inclusión han pasado a encabezar la lista de preocupaciones de muchos equipos directivos. Sin embargo, muchos directivos se encuentran perdidos a la hora de comprender las implicaciones de la preocupación internacional por las cuestiones de justicia social. Un enfoque holístico de la diversidad y la justicia social en el lugar de trabajo requiere una perspectiva antropológica aplicada, así como una perspectiva interdisciplinaria. El presente artículo sostiene que los directivos y líderes en general pueden tomar prestadas algunas técnicas muy sencillas y útiles de la antropología aplicada y la educación para fomentar un lugar de trabajo más inclusivo y justo.

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Introduction

The most recent United States Census shows that the population of the largest economy in the world is becoming more diverse (W. H. Frey, 2020; Gillion, 2020) . In particular Hispanics are growing as a percentage of the population (Gonzalez, 2010; Sabogal, 2012; Shumow & Pinto, 2014). One of the conclusions of the census is that the United States will become a majority-minority nation in the near future (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018). A similar process is taking place in the European Union (Cakir, 2009). An aging population and an influx of immigrants and refugees is changing the socio-cultural makeup of the block. Moreover, internal changes in lifestyle choices and greater recognition of cultural minorities is also making the European workplace more diverse than ever before (Broome, DeTurk, Kristjansdottir, Kanata, & Ganesan, 2002).

The previously mentioned increase in diversity coincides with a increased awareness of issues of Social Justice (Kibbey, 2002). Police reform in the United States, wealth inequality in the United Kingdom, and religious discrimination in France, inter alia, are some of the contemporary dialogues dealing with social justice (Chong, 2020). There is little agreement over the long term effects of the current dialogue of issues of social justice in the United States and Europe

however there is consensus in terms of the fact that it is changing the reality of the workplace (Constantino & Merchant, 1996; Ertel, 1991).

The nexus between an increased awareness of social justice issues and an increased diversity in the workplace has resulted in a plethora of challenges for managers trained during eras of greater homogeneity and greater concerns for issues of uniformity and standardization (Lemus, Feigenblatt, Orta, & Rivero, 2015; Stewart & Knowles, 2003). Approaches to management that used to be considered best practices are now perceived as coercive and discriminatory (Kamano & Khor, 1996; Kibbey, 2002; Masser & Abrams, 2004; Wei, 1996). Examples include an emphasis on a single organizational culture, a focus on quantitatively measured goals, and top down management styles, inter alia (Anders, 2004).

How should managers deal with this brave new world of diversity and increased sensitivity to differences? There is no simple answer to this question but managers can learn from the experiences of disciplines which have had since their inception a focus on culture and diversity. Anthropology has undergone a transformation from a discipline at the service of empire and governance to a discipline at the forefront of the struggle for social justice and empowerment (Bowman, 2001; "Declaration on Antropology and Human Rights," 1999; Eriksen, 2005; Turner, 1997). The transformation has not been a smooth process but rather a traumatic learning experience marked by conflict, both internal and external, and a reckoning with the past (Bob, 2002; Gulliver, 1988).

A cursory review of the history of management reveals a disregard for the influence of culture (Evans, 1976; Ewest & Klieg, 2012). The emphasis in Scientific Management is the standardization of procedures and tasks. Subsequent paradigms introduced the idea of organizational learning and of corporate culture but with an emphasis on one way communication and on the socialization of employees into a so-called "single culture" (Koch, 2009). Employees were considered to be passive recipients of the norms and values of the organization. Mentorship programs and a vast array of professional training activities were developed to achieve the goal of a "company man/woman" (Stewart & Knowles, 2003).

Perhaps the archetypal exponent of this approach is the Japanese "salary-man" (Bix, 2000; Chambers, 2007). In this approach the salary man, because it is usually men who are considered to be career

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executive material, was socialized as a full member of the company through a process of mentorship, rotations through every department, and extracurricular activities such as sports (Feigenblatt, 2009a, 2012; HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, & WAN, 2007; Kingston, 2011). The goal was, and to a certain extent still is, to mold the individual to fit the culture of the company (Morton & Olenik, 2005). This approach leaves very little space for diversity and instead attempts to recreate the conditions of total institutions.

The five main Western approaches to management: scientific theory by Frederick Taylor, administrative theory by Henry Fayol, Human Relations Theory by Elton Mayo, and X&Y theory by Douglas McGregor, and bureaucratic theory by Max Webber, oversimplify the role of culture in management and leadership in general (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004; Myers, 2008). Taylorism ignores culture altogether and instead focuses on observable behavior and measurable improvements to work processes. The other theories directly or indirectly tackle the issue of culture but in a very simplistic way. Douglas McGregor's X & Y Theory is a very good example of the reductionist tendency in management theory (Constantino & Merchant, 1996). In all fairness, the oversimplification is partly a result of the field's pragmatism and emphasis on the development of easy to apply best practices. The challenge is that reality is complex and changing demographics make simple formulas obsolete and counterproductive.

The field of education has taken important steps to adapt to changing demographics (Eldridge & Cranston, 2009; Feigenblatt, 2016; Georgakopoulos, 2009; Gonzalez, 2010). One such move is the pervasiveness of differentiated education (Goldin, 1999). The idea is that education has to adapt to the unique characteristics of each student rather than providing one-size-fits-all solutions (Kimball, 2013). Students come with different experiences, different levels of aptitude, and with a wide range of content mastery (Zhao, Hoge, Choi, & Lee, 2007). Therefore, many education scholars have reached the, now widely accepted conclusion that educators need to customize education to the particular characteristics of students (Lueddeke, 2008; Macmillan, 2001). The use of pre-tests is now prevalent in order to assess the starting point for students enrolled in a particular course of study (Zhao et al., 2007; Ziegler & Leslie, 2003).

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Materials and Methods

Differentiation transcends simply modifying content but rather includes the adaptation of both the delivery as well as the assessment of the content. Thus, a teacher may use a variety of approaches to teaching a lesson about the American Revolutionary War in order to reach students from different backgrounds (Stern & Johnston, 2013). Moreover, assessing the mastery of knowledge can also include differentiation. A student may show the teacher mastery of knowledge through a multimedia presentation or through a traditional essay. Evaluations can be done as a group or individually. The possibilities are endless but the goal is the same. Students should achieve certain learning goals. Socio-emotional learning is becoming an important aspect of differentiation in education (Adomeh, 2006; David, Szentagotai, Lupu, & Cosman, 2008; Feigenblatt, Paliwal, Rivero, Orta, & Lemus, 2015; Maag, 2008; Weinrach, Ellis, & MacLaren, 2001; Ziegler & Leslie, 2003). Students come to class with a range of experiences and are embedded in a range of contexts. As much as teachers are not expected to serve as therapists for students, it is important for teachers to explore and be aware of the socio-emotional circumstances of their students (Maag, 2008).

The field of education has borrowed many theories and approaches to leadership from the field of business administration (Bowen, 2013). Nevertheless, the field of education has had a considerable head start in terms of exploring the influence of culture on performance and in particular, in terms of developing flexible approaches to deal with diverse populations (Roche, 2013). There are several possible reasons for the field of education taking the challenge more seriously than the field of business management. One of the possible reasons for the difference relates to the assumptions made about the positionality of the managers/teachers (Stern & Johnston, 2013). In the case of business administration employees are sometimes viewed as part of the production process and therefore the emphasis is not catering to their needs but rather the focus is on how to get them to adapt to the organization's work processes (Ewest & Klieg, 2012; Fritz, 1996). On the other hand, in education there has been a gradual shift away from the teacher-centered approach in favor of a service oriented paradigm (Lueddeke, 2008). In other words, the relationship between teachers and students has been recalibrated to foster dialogue rather than one way communication. Moreover, differentiation and a student-centered education empower the student to achieve learning goals through a

vast array of ways and therefore help students maximize their potential by fostering creativity and autonomy (hallinger & Lu, 2013).

The extrapolation of lessons learned from the field of education to the interdisciplinary field of leadership studies is not only possible but necessary. Employees are important stakeholders and thus it is imperative for them to be involved in governance and to have a say in how goals are reached (Dingwerth, 2008; Ellis & Levy, 2008). The growing complexity of organizations and the increasing speed of change in terms of social norms and technology require the optimal use of the human capital available. A "one size fits all" approach to management stifles creativity and wastes the creative potential of employees.

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Results

Leading voices in the interdisciplinary field of leadership studies have acknowledged the importance of adapting to demographic changes and increased diversity in the workplace, however there is disagreement as to how to deal with the challenge (Broome et al., 2002; W. H. Frey, 2018; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Guinier, Fine, Balin, Bartow, & Stachel, 1994). Resistance to change in the field of management mirrors early debates in the field of education over similar issues and therefore lessons can be learned from this. Managers trained in top-down approaches find it hard to delegate and in particular can feel uncomfortable with giving employees discretion as to the how of accomplishing goals (Goldsmith, Greenberg, Robertson, & Hu-Chan, 2003; Patton, 2009). Greater autonomy for white-collar jobs and in particular for jobs that require high levels of training is commonplace but it is not as common for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs (Ajis et al., 2010). The routine nature of many manufacturing jobs shields the sector from some of the pressure to provide employees with greater autonomy. Nevertheless the transition of most advanced economies away from manufacturing and toward services, and the leap of many developing countries from agricultural societies into the information age, further exacerbates the need for change (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004; Banyai, 2010; Bayulgen, 2008; Bhaskaran, 2010).

Conclusions

Many scholars have brought to the attention of the academic community the need for interdisciplinary dialogue (Feigenblatt, 2010;

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Kuhn, 1996; Sponsel, 1994; Wellin & Fine, 2007). The reasons for greater dialogue across disciplinary borders are varied and cover a wide range of issues. Problems can be tackled from a wide array of perspectives and the strengths and weaknesses of one discipline can be compensated by the strengths and weaknesses of another (Kimball, 2013; Roche, 2013; Sorkin, 1983). Moreover, triangulation of a problem viewed through different lenses leads to a more holistic understanding (Deegan, 2007). Sadly, there is a widespread focus on the methodological elegance of studies rather than on the systemic understanding of the phenomena being researched; in a way the means has become more important than the end itself (Ellis & Levy, 2008; Feigenblatt, 2009b; Foucault, 1980). Therefore the main conclusion of this brief exploratory overview of the challenge brought about by greater diversity in the workplace is that a broad and flexible toolkit will be required by the leaders of the future. Differentiation from the classroom, cultural immersion from anthropological fieldwork, the suspension of judgment, tolerance of uncertainty, and communication skills are some of the many skills that should be included in leadership training (Ewest & Klieg, 2012; L. R. Frey, 1995).

Rather than provide a focused agenda for future research, the present paper aims to challenge the complacency of the academic community in regards to the development of best practices for contemporary leaders. Praxis and theory should work in a synergetic relationship. Cooperation across departments is a staple recommendation in the business sector, the same should be true in academia. Further interdisciplinary research is needed to tackle the challenge of social justice in the workplace as well as to explore how lessons from the development of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and education can enrich the fields of management and leadership.

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