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Management Education of Intercultural Groups – Traps of Stereotypes

Abstract:

Author presents a new perspective of business education of intercultural groups of students. Based on stereotypes analysis she has unhidden barriers of communication between students and lecturers, weak points of education system and integrity practices. Describing idea of organizational culture role in diversity management she has given fundamental suggestions how to avoid problems in above mentioned education in global world.

Key words:

Culture, culture diversity, interculture education, organizational culture.

Introduction

In contemporary, global world intercultural groups of students becoming just natural phenomenon in academic environment. Lot of books and papers have been written about cultural diversity, intercultural team management, etc. but it always seems to be only differences finders perspective and mostly analysis of foreigners behaviour. But, for me it was much more interesting how people's perception change when they are focused on similarities and create organizational cultured helping foreigners to socialize in new country. I think that such knowledge is even more important for business schools and universities, because if a school cannot deal with foreign students, how lecturers of this school can teach anyone intercultural management?

Intercultural business education

When we meet a representative of a culture we do not know, we are either fascinated or repelled by certain artefacts and stereotypes coded in our brain. Sooner or later, these emotions should disappear if we are supposed to work with such persons, as they may not obscure the person as an individual with his or her unique personality, experience, ambitions, etc. We must remember that not every Hindu is contemplative and spiritual, not every Tibetan

is a monk, not every Frenchman is a great lover, not every Chinese man practices martial arts, not every Nigerian is lazy and not every Pole is an alcoholic. Of course, cultural background should not be disregarded as a source of human behaviour, particularly if you are an individual surrounded by a community from a different cultural circle. Still, I believe that the discussion of interculturality will slightly resemble a dispute between an individual-oriented psychologist and a group behaviour-focused sociologist. These two may debate for years, yet each of them may be right.

Ewa Nowicka remarks in her outstanding book *Świat człowieka – świat kultury [The World of Man - The World of Culture]*[1;23] that as far as anthropology is concerned, studies on diversity had to evolve into studies on differences. She also questions the reason behind applying knowledge in such fields as psychology and sociology to representatives of cultures outside the European and North American circles, as most of the theories and concepts in these disciplines of science were defined exclusively on the basis of research on representatives of these two cultures[1;24]. Perhaps with this approach to interculturality, the field is becoming a sort of a separate branch of knowledge.

However, on the basis of my observations of representatives of different nationalities in the academic environment of Polish, Finnish and Danish universities, I am willing to conclude that in order to achieve effective and friendly cooperation of intercultural groups, one should not search for differences, and to integrate this highly variable environment one should focus more on similarities, clearly defining the rules of cooperation and concentrating on each individual's unique features, even using the fundamentals of psychological and sociological knowledge. Studying diversity may turn into a "pursuit" of differences in the negative meaning of the concept. This leads to a sort of "oversensitivity" to each foreigner's - and to one's own - cultural background. It often turns out that the so-called cultural differences become less important while the true issue is the ordinary and common difference in characters of particular individuals.

During my three-year experience in working with representatives of different cultures, I noted that young people arriving at a foreign country (such as Poland) would not want us to expose their diversity but only to respect the differences. For example, Polish university students wanted to organize a "Nigerian Day" in good faith, to enable students from Nigeria to present their culture. However, the Nigerians did not feel the pressure to wear traditional clothes, speak their mother tongue or present their folk songs. They found it more important to feel a part of their new community. They would often emphasize that Africa is not a uniform continent but rather a mix of multiple different countries and tribes. They were proud

of their origin but did not want people to point fingers at them as "the others". I have noticed similar behaviours in representatives of other nationalities as well (e.g. Chinese or Turkish people). At the same time I realized that the common interest in interculturality, so widespread in literature, has its sources in "cultivating diversity" and reinforcing stereotypes. A new group of scientists has formed, specializing in so-called "interculturality", but as these people do not have rudimentary knowledge in the field of anthropology, sociology or psychology (which they would consciously ignore while seeking to discover new phenomena and principles), they tend to draw even dangerous conclusions. I am referring here to experts in such new fields as "interculturality in management", "interculturality in education", "intercultural communication", etc. In my opinion, general principles of functioning of human groups and individuals can be successfully implemented in intercultural groups as well, and there is not much to discover in this field.

Literature on interculturality is extensive, as the issue is being discussed not only by anthropologists but also by sociologists, psychologists, neurologists, biologists, geneticists, or even management specialists etc. Therefore, new hypotheses appear regarding the grounds of cultural differences. For example, an article published by Przekrój *Rasa ma znaczenie [Race Matters]*[2] presents results of multiple research projects carried out with the objective on answering the question whether human behaviour is determined by race. There was another very interesting article published in Charaktery in June - *Jaka kultura, taki mózg [Like Culture, Like Brain]*[3], postulating that the cultural environment has a major influence on our brains. Of course, I could quote many more examples. However, on the basis of my own experience and observations, I would like to present the issue of interculturality from a different viewpoint, namely from the perspective of a person who happened to work with multinational groups in Poland and in Denmark.

At this point, it is worth pointing out the most common attitudes of authors that may be encountered in related readings: 1) I, the author, was in a foreign country, and I am going to describe what I saw, what I experienced, which strangers I met; 2) I, the author, was observing the behaviours of strangers in my home country, and I am going to describe their behaviours. Each of these attitudes has certain advantages and disadvantages, and the choice of one of these attitudes is strongly determined by the author's traits, his knowledge, professional mindset, experience, ability to make objective judgments. In the first case, it is important whether the author was only the observer or also a participant of the group functioning, whether or not he was able to access all areas of life of the given community, etc.

For example, Wojciech Cejrowski offers outstanding descriptions of the everyday lives of Indians, but as a woman, I would like to learn more from his books of the rituals, magic and daily lives of Indian women, of which there is little mention in Cejrowski's books. However, it is understandable that this author would be primarily interested in male affairs and that as a man, he is unable to access all the secrets of women's lives.

In the case of the second type, authors tend to excessively focus on the cultural shock phenomenon, or their descriptions tend to be records of differences between the author's life and the studied cultural group. Another common error is drawing conclusions on the basis of contact with few foreigners only.

What I found interesting was my own behaviour and behaviours of other teachers who had to work with representatives of other cultures in their home territory. In the context of globalization, common mobility and migration, I believe that observations made from this perspective can be useful, as we may at any time face the following dilemma: how should I, the individual (the teacher, the manager, etc.) behave in front of a group originating from a different cultural circle, which I have to work with? Can I still make any use of my knowledge of psychology, sociology, management?

The first feelings I experienced during my meeting with Nigerian students can be described as a mix of fear, uncertainty and curiosity. Kind of automatically, I had the urge to seek diversity and to reinforce stereotypical beliefs. For example, the whole group came about 30 minutes late to the first lecture - I am emphasizing that it was the "whole group", including Polish students. For me, however, it was an indication of Africans not paying attention to arriving on time. Another time, other lecturer would complain that foreign students came to the lecture with food and kept eating during class. Was it really an example of a different culture? Has this never occurred among Polish students? I could give multiple examples of such behaviours, which soon made me realize that our perception is far from objective. At the same time, there is this easily noticeable similarity to the well-known labelling effect in school. The student who did something bad at the very beginning will always get more negative assessment, and the one who was first perceived as an angel will always get good grades. Stereotypes are such labels that we attach to entire nationalities, religious groups, etc. Still, we have known the injustice of these since childhood.

Generally, I noticed two main types of attitudes among teachers. The first type was the open-minded attitude - these teachers would be eager to learn the students' first names (despite never doing this in Polish groups), they would talk to students after class, give them a hand in facing the problems of daily life. Unfortunately, and perhaps subconsciously, these

teachers were not sincere about their own intentions, which led to many conflicts and a lot of frustration further into the cooperation. The teachers expected to receive gratitude and friendliness in return, and if they did not get this, they would very often consider themselves used and abused. They would perceive themselves as naive, too good-hearted, too involved. In fact, the foreigners' behaviour was not a consequence of cultural differences but rather - cynical as it may seem - a typical mechanism of taking unfair advantage of a submissive teacher, which often occurs in Poland as well, as early as in primary school. On the other hand, foreigners would show their gratitude through saying an ordinary "thank you", without realizing that the teachers were actually expecting continuous adoration (which was quite reasonable, as the problem lay in the teachers and not in the students).

An extremely different attitude among university staff was the defensive attitude, also presenting itself in two ways: surrounding oneself with a wall, or withdrawal. The first type of teacher would build a "wall" around himself with strict rules, stand-offish attitude, treating the entire group as a uniform mass (no first names, no unique traits, etc.). These teachers were clearly expecting foreigners to be more well-mannered and quiet for the very reason of being in a strange country, implying that whatever a Polish student may get away with is unacceptable for a foreign student. This is another example of a misjudgement. Why should it be the case? This issue was perfectly illustrated by Lars von Treier in one of the scenes in *Dogville*, where Grace - the main character - takes a shortcut running on a certain path, and a town resident tells her that this is forbidden. Grace asks why, if everyone walks this path. The answer is that she as a stranger has to walk on sidewalks and not take shortcuts. All students are trying to make their lives and their academic careers easier, but teachers would be more appalled by inappropriate behaviours of foreigners. For example, two students (a Pole and a foreigner) missed the deadline for obtaining the teacher's signature in their student record books. The teacher was willing to justify the Polish student's behaviour with normal youthful carelessness, while as regards the foreigner, the teacher was reinforced in his conviction that "they all behave in this way because they are irresponsible". Without the official rules in force, the teacher would probably be willing to set a more strict punishment.

The withdrawing type of teacher would perform diligently as a teacher but at the same time clearly isolate himself from the intercultural group, avoid it, perceiving himself as a theoretically tolerant but not intervening type. This type was in fact most prone to make concessions to students. When asked for the reason of his submissive and indulgent attitude, such teacher would most frequently answer that 'he was sorry for those foreigners who are so helpless and lonely in their new environment', 'he did not understand foreigners', 'he was

incapable of managing this group and wanted to end the class quickly (relieve himself from the tension)'.

An important problem that also occurred in working with intercultural groups was the issue of racism and intolerance, or rather lack of awareness of the meaning of these concepts. One of the reasons why teachers were afraid to impose disciplinary sanctions was that they could be accused of racist motivation. The very possibility of being called a racist terrified the teachers. On the other hand, the teachers were aware that indulgence and agreeing to everything is not a form of tolerance. Commonly used concepts needed to be redefined, which often took place during conversations among teachers and students. People would explain that you are a racist if you say 'I won't sit at the same table as you because you are of a different race or religion' and not when you say 'if you cheat, you won't pass the test'. As regards tolerance, L. Kołakowski's illustrative explanation was successfully used: *The different thing is when I say to someone: 'you are propagating horrible, wrong and harmful views, but I won't cut your head off and I'll leave the matters for God to handle', and it is a very different thing if I say: 'say whatever you want of religion, it doesn't matter at all'*[4;38]. By the way, as regards religion (with Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, atheists among our students), we adopted the principle of unrestricted presentation of religious affiliation, celebrating religious holidays, but with no tolerance to any solicitation to a change of religion.

Ewa Nowcka, the author already mentioned above, claims that a necessary prerequisite of learning another culture is to understand that culture. One of the key steps here is effective communication. This was another source of problems. Because the course discussed in the article is conducted in English, the teachers and the students alike are fluent in English. So, where is the source of the problem? First, in pronunciation. Everyone would speak in a unique way, and one and the same word may sound differently when spoken by a Polish, Chinese, Hindu or Nigerian person. Although it took some time, many teachers managed to understand various pronunciation styles through working in an international group. Moreover, teachers had to overcome stress related to lecturing in a foreign language.

I personally have not noticed any differences in perception, intellectual ability or learning skills which would be based on cultural differences among students. These qualities were certainly more strongly influenced by the level of education in the students' previous schools, their individual abilities and motivations.

Summary

The true challenge of multicultural work is to learn to set clear rules of cooperation, comprehensible communication, assertive attitude and empathy, without distinguishing students by origin and without labelling, but first of all to be able to admit one's own mistakes and to be willing to remedy them as soon as possible. Every university (or corporate organization) needs to create its own organizational culture and to identify a clear framework of acceptable behaviours. Then, everyone is able to find their place in such organization, even if they come from the other end of the world.

Bibliography

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