The Diversity Icebreaker as a flexible tool for diversity management

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Introduction

The need for flexibility in organizations on different levels is being emphasized recently more than ever due to instability of modern markets. Although traditionally areas such as operational flexibility, product customization, and resource flexibility, and their relation to performance were in the centre of interest, recently also flexibility in the human resources management practices gained some attention and has been found to be associated with greater financial performance (Bhattacharya et al., 2005).

In the present paper we acknowledge this need as well as combine it with the requirements of ever increasing diversification of workforce in the modern organizations. This trend could potentially increase the company's responsiveness to the market's needs (by increasing the range of possible skills and competences accessible), but which – at the same time – advances the need for further flexible managerial practices1. In this model, the managers are in between the market and stakeholders, acute for changes in the environment, and their workforce (often diversified). A flexible managerial practice in such situation is the key to success: being capable of employing a range of different perspectives, skills and competences found within diversified workforce, to meet the requirements of ever-changing market. Furthermore,

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1. For example, we know that heterogeneous teams outperform homogeneous teams only when diversity is well managed, while this relationship is reversed if not (West, 2004).

we present a training intervention technique relevant for flexible human resources.

The paper is organized as follows: first, the definition of the human resources flexibility is given; then we discuss the fear of diversity (a common reaction among the managers faced with highly diversified workforce) and show how it intensifies the need for a flexible HR management. This is followed by extension of the classical approach to diversity by the "deep-level differences" perspective. Ultimately, we present the Diversity Icebreaker concept as a training intervention, which promotes or directly contributes to various elements of flexibility in HR management. The relevant effects of the Diversity Icebreaker will be grouped in two categories: a) internal – resulting from the structure underlying the concept, b) external – emerging in its application areas.

Flexibility in HR

The universally applied definition of flexibility in the organizational context is one by Sanchez: "Flexibility is the ability of a firm to respond to various demands from its dynamic competitive environment" (1995).

Wright and Snell (1998) applied such understood flexibility to the human resources area and proposed a model comprising of three components:

1. HR systems that can be quickly adapted and implemented (the extent to which firm's HR strategies and practices can be rapidly applied across contexts, time and people);

2. human capital platform with a broad array of skills ("number of potential alternative uses to which employee skills can be applied");

3. behavioural flexibility of the employees ("the extent to which employees possess a broad repertoire of behavioural scripts

that can be adapted to situation-specific demands" (Bhat-
tacharya et al., 2005).

Flexibility can be looked upon as the answer to the funda-
mental dilemma in organizational theory, i.e. the simultaneous
need for change (be innovative, adapt) on the one hand, and the
need for organizational stability (coordination, control, continui-
ty, predictability, etc.) on the other hand (Fellenz, 2000).

Diversity management

As the workforce in the organizations is becoming more
heterogeneous, the issue of diversity management is being em-
phasized worldwide. Many managers are faced with running
a diversified workforce and often experience fears related to the
challenges that it brings.

The first fear might be related to approaching and under-
standing someone who is different and is articulated in the simi-
larity-attraction paradigm (Heider, 1958). It is a tendency to feel
more anxiety in relation to people that are different.

The second fear is the fear of losing control and it is felt
mostly by senior managers. Many managers fear that if they have
to increase diversity in their human resources (either because of
the quotas, or the work market reality), they will lose control over
performance.

The first fear may make managers restrain themselves from
open communication with employees and hinder the flow of
information, as well as make them not being able to include
everyone entirely in the work processes – which impedes taking
the best out of diversity. The second fear is related to the managers'
role towards the external, changing and demanding environment
– one cannot deliver as promised if one does not have the control
over subordinates.

These fears call for an effective training that would enable both managers, and anyone else in the organization, be more confident and manage the best out of diversity.

The field of diversity management has been dominated by a paradigm in which the most important sources of diversity are considered to be the demographic characteristics, with race and gender of the primary concern (Milliken & Martins, 1996, Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt, 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). The goals here are to create equal opportunities for people to excel, whatever their demographic characteristics, and to create well-functioning workforces that are diverse on these character-istics. These are important aspects of diversity and there is no question that this focus on diversity has created healthy dialogue and strong results in many contexts.

However, this approach focuses only on the surface diversi-ty and we address the diversity also from the deep-level values and personal attributes (Harrison et al, 1998). This results in per-ceiving the people as being different also in terms of the differ-ences between their preferences for interaction, communication, problem solving styles, etc.

The Diversity Icebreaker concept builds on this idea, which makes it an alternative diversity training intervention.

The Diversity Icebreaker

The Diversity Icebreaker (DI) is a training and development concept typically used in six different areas: team, project work and innovation seminars, cross-cultural trainings, diversity man-agement, communication and conflict management trainings, kick-offs, self-understanding and leadership development. DI consists of a questionnaire (measuring preferences for commu-nication, interaction and problem solving styles) and a seminar formula built upon it.

The questionnaire consists of 42 items with a semi-ipsative response scale. Three dimensions are represented in the questionnaire, labelled Red, Blue, and Green. Validation studies have been conducted relating the three dimensions to concepts such as the Big Five personality factors, Emotional Intelligence, Cultural Values, and Team Performance (Ekelund & Langvik, 2008).

The seminar formula consists of four subsequent stages. In the first one, the participants fill out the questionnaire and score the results by themselves. They obtain results on three dimensions: Red, Blue, and Green. The preferences and colours have not been previously explained. In the second stage, the participants are assigned to the three corresponding groups, according to what their most dominant colour is, and asked to work together to answer two questions:

> "What are the good qualities of your own colour in interaction with others?"

and:

> "What are the qualities of the two other colour groups in interactions they have with each of the other groups?"

In the third stage, the groups are asked to present the results. The way how the participants in one group perceive their own colour is contrasted with how the other two groups perceive it, and attention is given to the processes of social construction taking place when the meaning of Red, Blue and Green is being negotiated.

The fourth stage is a learning process which is initiated by asking the participants a question:

> "What have you learned from the time you started filling out the questionnaire, until now?"

Some of the typical answers to this question are: "it is nice to be working among equals", "there are some significant conse-

quences of labelling each other", "we need all colours when we work together", or "it is OK to be Red if others acknowledge this as a positive quality in our interaction." All these comments are then acknowledged by the trainers and the discussion is based on selected theories, as well as on the goals and objectives of the particular training session.

The fifth stage is concerned with developing specific practices for the future and emerges as a salient follow-up of the understanding of the social construction of the categories. It can be used to develop a collective group into a self-managed group, e.g. in regard to task distribution, where a Red persons asks a Blue one to take over an analysis that requires attention to details and figures.

Flexibility within

The fixed structure, the trilemma of Red, Blue and Green, can be looked upon as a "metaphorical archetype" that can be used as a structured way of perceiving and acting in many areas. The pre-defined three-dimensional structure of Red, Blue and Green is filled in a flexible way by the bottom-up, social processes in the seminar.

The Red category represents the relation and human oriented preferences; Blue stands for fact-based communication and analytical approach to problems; and Green represents orientation towards the change, creativity and an unconventional, "whole-picture" approach to problem solving.

There are three reasons why the trilemma structure behind the DI is unique:

First of all, the three categories emerged from focus groups of ordinary people asked to group various persuasive behaviours used in communication – they are not a result of factor analysis performed on a number of items (Ekelund, 1997). That makes

them intuitively understood and easily defined in the social processes taking place in the seminar and afterwards.

Second, the dimensions are not entirely independent, which has been reflected in the semi-ipsative format of the questionnaire: a respondent is not forced to choose one of the three statements associated with either Red, Blue or Green, but can distribute the 6 "ticks" between them. This makes DI related closer to the concept of traits than types, and allows participants to express themselves in line with, e.g. "I am primarily Red, but also Blue, and Green".

Third, this further implies that when a person meets another person that is different, e.g. when a dominant Red person meets a dominant Blue, the Red has some internal Blue qualities that can be used for empathy and create a perception of similarity.

How do participants define the meaning of each colour in the second stage of the seminar? First, they refer to the questions in the questionnaire representing Red, Blue, and Green (which is revealed to them when they tear off the first page of the questionnaire). Furthermore, they enrich the descriptions with examples from their personal history illustrating different behavioural patterns adjacent to particular colours (like in the anchoring process, described by Moscovici (1984). **This is when the content becomes dependent on the local culture and diversified background of the participants.** Afterwards, a collective acceptance in the group of these ideas takes place, and they are put on the flip-chart for further presentation to others. The firmness of the trilemma structure makes it easy applicable in different contexts, even though the bottom-up processes produce different results in different local cultures

The qualities of the trilemma structure, and the processes described above, result in an increased flexibility for two reasons:

1. The trilemma structure helps the participants understand that they are not either-or (and nor are the others!), and that being dominantly Red does not mean that one does not

have the Blue elements. The participants are being trained in shifting the perspective from their dominant colour to the remaining two. This promotes empathy as well as makes them develop a broader repertoire of behavioural and cognitive scripts that can be adapted to situation- and person-specific demands.

2. The categories are intuitive and are being defined by the participants themselves. This makes them easily acknowledged and applicable across situations. Also, as aforementioned, it is stressed that one has all three colours in. This reduces the fear of being different as well as of approaching someone who is. It allow for a more open communication and flow of information, as well as including those who are different entirely in the work processes. Thus, paradoxically, by making participants acknowledge another kind of diversity that cuts across the surface diversity – and by helping them to create a common language to define it – we help them to cope with diversity before they submerge in the maze of cultural, age or other differences, which are usually more complex and difficult to comprehend from the start (Ekelund & Langvik, 2008).

The Red, Blue and Green model in relation to other areas

In the following section we will highlight those areas where the dimensions most often have been applied in our consultative work:

Acknowledgement

Efficiency in a team is achieved when each person contributes the maximum of his or hers unique expertise and skills. In order to achieve innovation it is important that everyone feels acknowledgement, which leads to a feeling of safety when divergent ideas are being put forward. An open and safe process will give a possibility for group to add new perspectives, reframe them and

use them to throw light on tacit knowledge and potential opportunities.

This is especially important and visible in highly diversified teams, where members of different gender, age, culture and profession can bring a great number of various skills, expertise and perspectives to the benefit of the group but, at the same time, the large differences between them can hinder open communication and information flow.

The team members are willing to contribute their unique input only when they trust in that it will be recognized by the group. Especially the people representing non-dominant groups (like a woman, in a typically male-dominant culture; or a Green sales person, in an organization dominated by the Blue) must expect that an alternative contribution will be treated well by the others – if not, they may withhold their unique qualities.

The word 'acknowledgement' is here taken from the therapeutic tradition of Rogers (1951), where the therapist acknowledges the client by creating a safe situation, where he or she can openly share the concerns in order to grow. Such acknowledgement is also relevant in the organizational context by making more perspectives and approaches visible and accessible, which enables team to be more flexible and grow when drawing on its all possible resources.

The shared language of Red, Blue, and Green introduced by the DI makes it easier to talk about differences and the processes present in the seminar, and facilitate the recognition of various contributions that the different colours can make to the team or organization. The Blues say: "We get things structured and organized!", the Greens claim: "We figure out where we're going!", and the Reds add: "We make sure everyone works together to get there!". Acknowledging these differences seems to end with consistency in a conclusion: "Actually, we all need each other." This sentence brings relief to the tension being created with out-group processes and sharing of prejudices.

Eventually, thus created climate of acknowledgement directly transcribes on an increased capacity for the diversified human capital platform to put its all potential resources to a number of uses, among other, illustrated in project work and different process stages.

Process stages

In the project work literature and in the team developmental theory there are many process stages models that help to apply different and most relevant managerial practices in different phases of, e.g. a product creation. A four-stage model in relation to Red, Blue, and Green, and to situations where workforce diversity can be a powerful factor, has been suggested (Ekelund & Rydningen, 2008):

a. **Defining the challenge/task:** perspectives from all members are needed to be put together to create a new, complete understanding of the problem – a new "Gestalt". Although everyone should be involved in this stage, the combining ideas and creating a larger picture is often done under the lead of the Green perspective.

b. **Creating a solution through synergy.** In this stage the new, "Gestalt" understanding is negotiated into a feasible solution based upon member's various resources and willingness to contribute. Often the Red qualities are necessary, to soothe frictions and mediate.

c. **Execution stage.** This is a time where people have to respect the decisions made and deliverables promised. Follow up, co-ordinating communication and strict adherence to plans are important. The Blue characteristics seem to have the preferred qualities required for this stage.

d. **Learning stage.** In this stage everyone reflects upon one's personal experiences and outcomes – from one's own, unique perspective. Openness, ability to formulate and receive con-

structive critique – and acknowledgement for different perspectives, are crucial for a meaningful learning process within a diversified platform.

Each of the stages requires flexibility in shifting managerial practices and behavioural patterns of individual team members. Often, a well-functioning team moves the authority from one member to another member to best fit the different process stages. Being a competent team player in all stages requires both: individual (building competences) and a whole-team training (creating shared mental models).

The two important contributions of the DI intervention here are: 1) acknowledgment necessary for members to be open, change and contribute differently in the different stages of the process; 2) training of the team members in a repertoire of behavioural scripts necessary in different stages of the process.

Flexibility in composition of groups

One of the major ideas in teamwork is the one of team roles and personal qualities that make one fit for specific roles (Belbin, 1981, Margerison & McCann, 1991). However, it seems difficult to find support for such models (Anderson & West, 1998) and we recommend not recruiting fixed teams with premises in such models.

Nonetheless, dividing members into various combinations based on their personal qualities can be useful for developmental purposes and we often apply this in training following the classic DI seminar. Most typical combinations and developmental objectives are:

1. mono-coloured groups to achieve amplified efficiency on one dimension (e.g. an all-Red group to create strategies of communication with client);

2. multi-coloured groups to increase integration and understanding of complexity (e.g. communication strategies on

change that need to address all employees successfully, for this reason elements from Red, Blue and Green needs to be integrated;

3. groups of two representatives of each colour to create a safe and dialogue- (or trialogue-) oriented learning group (often used in leadership development programs as learning groups at the end of training);

4. groups of one representative of each colour for deeper "trialogues", involvement and training (often relevant in personal development programs and in project-oriented groups that work on assigned tasks during training and seminar days).

These groups seem to be able to function effectively in a short time due to shared mental models of how they can work and communicate with flexibility of perspectives and roles.

Discussion

The effects of the Diversity Icebreaker among teams and managers include:

• a common understanding of diversity resulting from the properties of the Red, Blue, and Green model itself (founded on the ideas of the deep-level diversity), and a shared language cutting across other forms of surface-diversity;

• acknowledgement for diversity, followed by increased openness and improved flow of resources and information, which can be accessed in order to expand the team's flexibility to answer the market's needs;

• training in taking on different than dominant perspectives, i.e. flexibility in roles and tasks distribution, better understanding of how different colours can be important and contribute in different areas, process stages, etc., which could be an attractive gateway to self-managed, diversified workforce.

The aforementioned effects reduce fears and uncertainty related to approaching people that are different, as well as the fear of losing control over a diversified workforce. We believe that the DI intervention moves managers a step ahead towards a clearer understanding of how flexible managerial practices in utilising employees' range of different perspectives, skills and competences found in the diversified workforce; may help to meet the requirements of ever-changing market.

Nevertheless, and despite commercial success of the concept and the positive feedback received from the DI users, we recognize that there are issues and questions that remain unanswered and call for further research in the field of HR flexibility management:

- One may ask to what extent people can and should be flexible? Or, who and in what context should be flexible and change the behaviour?

- Is it possible to predefine flexibility, e.g. in relation to promotion of different behaviours in different process stages; and when such regulation of flexibility would achieve an opposite effect and turn into a rigid bureaucracy?

The Diversity Icebreaker is mostly used in the Scandinavian countries and most developmental work related to it comes from the Scandinavian management culture, which is collectivistic and characterized by a low power distance (Hofstede, 2001, Smith et al 2003). Would the seminar create similar effects in regard to flexibility in other cultures, e.g. where individuals are more competitive and the respect for authority is the dominant value?

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