

diversity



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Skillfully Managing Diversity: An Approach Using “My Diversity Manager”

Globally, firms are operating in complex and increasingly diverse work environments. New challenges and demands require new approaches for managing the daily encounters in the workplace. The old saying “do it my way or the highway,” no longer works. Attracting and retaining talent in an environment where downsizing and flatter organizational structures are the norm makes it even more compelling to be a skilled manager of diversity. Managing refers not only to people with a manager’s title, but to anyone who works with or relates to people. We are all managers of diversity at work and in our personal lives.

Law firms are challenged by an evolving work environment, which includes part-time and flex work arrangements, male and female communications, divergent work styles, and multi-generational work force. Addressing and managing these dynamics requires skilled and mindful approaches acquired only through awareness, respect, patience and practice.

The Roosevelt Thomas Consulting and Training (RTCT) developed My Diversity Manager™ (MDM™), a five-pronged framework to address conflict and systemic issues that influence productivity and relationships. This tool is designed to guide you through a series of fact finding steps to aid you in skillfully reaching well-thought solutions and managing diversity tensions. The steps of MDM™ become automatic the more you use them.

Before beginning the five steps of My Diversity Manager™, investigate what is going on. You have to understand what is going on before you can reach a realistic solution.

Describe the issue or situation. What is the root of the problem? What are the facts and the circumstances? Define the problem carefully, if not, the solution reached may not be the appropriate one for managing the problem.

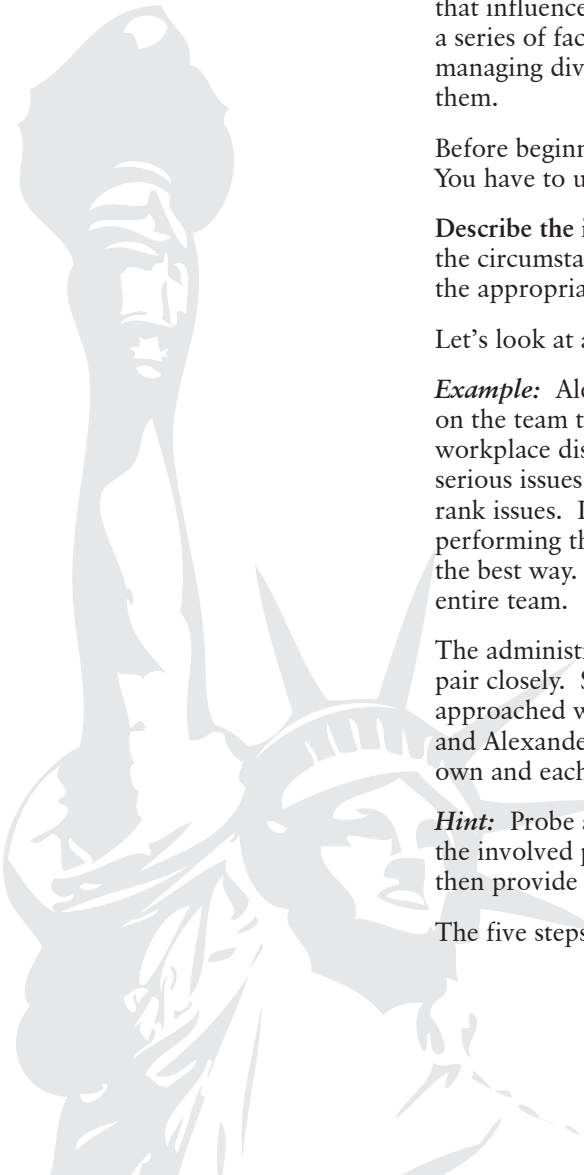
Let’s look at a typical situation.

Example: Alexander and Gabrielle constantly bicker and snap at one another. Everyone on the team thinks they have a “personality conflict” and the administrator agrees. Such workplace disagreements are often dismissed as “just a personality conflict,” ignoring serious issues such as work style differences, gender-based miscommunication or perhaps rank issues. In the case of Alexander and Gabrielle, they had worked in other firms, performing the same task but differently...very differently. They believed their way was the best way. Together they created an atmosphere of animosity and dissention for the entire team.

The administrator worked through the first step of the MDM™ and observed the pair closely. She realized that it was not their personalities, but how differently they approached work assignments. The administrator then worked directly with Gabrielle and Alexander using MDM™ tool to aid in their understanding and appreciation for their own and each others’ work styles, resolving the conflict.

Hint: Probe and dig until you fully understand the issue. Be observant and speak with the involved parties. Get the facts, acknowledge the emotional aspect of the conflict and then provide solutions to the issue -- as well as the hurt feelings.

The five steps of My Diversity Manager™:



Step 1 – Recognize the Mixture

Who is in the mix?

What are their different perspectives on the issue(s)?

Once you have outlined the facts, investigate what mixtures are impacted by this situation. Mixtures are key elements of a firm or team. The elements can be people (such as employees, clients or vendors), communication styles, language differences, values, philosophy, or anything that impacts how work gets done.

List the factors involved and ask how they are similar and different. Examine the various perspectives or attitudes about the situation. While making your list, be sure to include all significant parties and elements.

The next example looks at the diversity of two offices in the same firm - home office and a Midwest regional office.

Example: Corporate headquarters, also known as the “home” office, issued a new time-off policy for all firm offices. This really upset the Midwest regional office. The home and Midwest regional offices comprise just two parts of the overall mixture. Other regional offices, the content of the new policy, all employees, and your clients who are impacted by the way employees feel are also part of the mix. The perspectives and attitudes of all entities must be taken into account before reaching a solution. Understanding the problem from a diversity of perspectives will help build a stronger rationale and justification when resolving the issue.

Hint: Do not be hasty when investigating the mixture. Give it time and include the perspectives of all pertinent elements. The more information you have helps shape a more comprehensive solution. Did you include yourself in the mixture?

Step 2 – Assess the Tensions

What are the causes of the tension(s)?

What feeling and stresses do the individuals’ experience?

Once you have done a thorough job of listing the mixture components, assess what is causing tension for each. This should be easier based on your discovery of the diverse perspectives in the last step.

Tension, a natural sensation, is expressed as apprehension, anticipation or even excitement. Tension in the workplace may, however, be a signal that something else is occurring. Don’t ignore it. If you ignore these tensions, be prepared to become angry, disappointed, exhausted and frustrated. Whenever there is diversity or complexity, there will be tension which needs to be monitored and addressed. Relax. Once you begin to approach tension in a systematic and thoughtful manner, you will grow more comfortable. You will learn to anticipate, plan and manage tensions skillfully.

Let’s further examine the home vs. Midwest office situation and identify what tensions and feelings were expressed.

Example: While the home office felt quite comfortable with the new policy and experienced little or no tension, the Midwest regional office was more adversely affected. The relations between the two offices became strained.

The home office expressed frustration, anger and annoyance towards the regional office’s lack of support. They believe the regional offices always complain and never are satisfied.

The Midwest regional office was angry, expressing they were overlooked stepchild who is never included in important matters. The regional office is always expected to be satisfied with whatever decisions were made for them.

Human Resources personnel were exasperated. They believed the formal policy was fair and equitable. The policy was developed in response to complaints of inequity and favoritism. Prior to the policy, the practice of granting time off was informal, arbitrary and at the manager’s subjective discretion.

Hint: However uncomfortable the situation may be, do not ignore the tensions or feelings of others. Take a deep breath; manage your discomfort.

Your other option is to just sit by and watch it erupt, which will not resolve anything.

Step 3 – Identify the Requirements

What are the objectives or goals?

What is needed to reach the goal(s)?

It is time to look at the problem through a “requirements” lens. Requirements refer to the goals and objectives which move the firm towards success and competitive advantage. They are the firm’s core values, which serve and your focal point for solving problems. Be clear about the requirements of the firm and your team.

At this point you need to examine yours and others’ personal preferences for getting work done. You have to determine if personal or firm traditions (what has “always” been done here) are at play. Preferences, conveniences and traditions can get in the way of making sound decisions based on business requirements. Courage is called for when opposing personal preferences, conveniences or traditions.

Example: Meeting clients’ needs may be paramount, but without an efficient, satisfied staff the work is impeded.

Home office had decided to institute a new time-off policy with guidelines to make it easier to plan and manage time off. The Midwest office operates differently than the home office. Because they were not consulted in the decision making process, the requirements of their office were not considered. Tensions escalated - they were upset! Offices in different states may have different: hours, observed holidays, means of transportation and commuting options. All of these differences should have been discussed while developing the policy.

Hint: Preferences, personal or firm traditions and conveniences are not the deciding criteria; requirements are. Appropriate decisions and policies are based on business needs and what expedites attaining its goals, objectives and successes.

Step 4 – Propose Other Actions

What actions might offer a better outcome?

What might be some results of these actions?

You have done a great deal of thinking and information gathering. What do you propose as a solution? As you decide which options are appropriate, weigh the consequences and results for each action.

Example:

Consider the following before issuing the policy:

1. Invite the Midwest office and other regional offices to collaborate on developing the policy.
2. Have joint team office meetings to discuss implications before policy implementation.
3. Once finalized, meet to explain the policy and how it would work in their environment. All parties would be recognized, valued and included in the decision making.

Hint: Solicit and include opinions from diverse sources. Collaborate and co-create to ensure the diversity of opinions and solutions. This is a team building opportunity.

Step 5 – Identify Cultural Supports and Barriers

What cultural factors may support your proposed actions? How might you capitalize on these?

What cultural factors may impede your proposed actions? How might you counteract these?

Consider your firm's culture. What will support your decisions and what may be an impediment? Plan how you can enlist allies and address obstacles.

Every firm has a culture. Home offices and regional offices usually have significant cultural differences that may cause some tension. Their norms, values and behaviors, including conflict avoidance, become entrenched and are the catalysts for increased interoffice clashes.

Firms often describe their culture as "nice", meaning polite, formal and harmonious. Nice cultures are often conflict avoidant, tending to close their eyes to unpleasant situations, hoping they will disappear. Other cultures can be open and flexible, or rigid and authoritative.

In the case of the home and regional offices, the administrator assessed these cultures to find the allies and potential obstacles. This helped to anticipate any consequences resulting from the chosen options.

Hint: Enlist allies early in the change process to help counteract the barriers and naysayers, particularly if you are proposing any shift from the normal routine.

Summary

Approach diversity challenges by expecting tension. Work environments, systems and people are complex. Address unattended tensions. Do not let them fester and infect the environment. Use the MDM™ framework and available resources to help you think through difficult situations and become more comfortable with managing diversity tensions. To ensure effective, appropriate and inclusive solutions, enlist allies, build authentic relationships and keep learning.

The framework is also effective when working on personal challenges at home.

Andrea Cisco is a Principal Consultant and facilitator. She has extensive experience, both personal and professional, in the corporate, non-profit and community sectors and has provided coaching and consulting services on human resource issues, such as, managing the diverse workforce, work and personal life issues, mentoring, sexual harassment and conflict resolution. She has consulted in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. Her clients include the consumer goods, manufacturing, legal, professional, financial services, health care and pharmaceutical and transportation sectors.

Andrea held such positions as Personnel Director and Benefits Administrator for the New York City Partnership and its affiliated organizations, and Director of Personnel Research for the New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry where she produced six annual surveys on salaries, benefits and personnel practices. She has also served as co-leader of the Northeast Region Diversity Practice at Towers Perrin where she was responsible for business development, program design and delivery, and recruitment and training of contract staff and junior consultants. Her work with the American Institute for Managing Diversity (AIMD) includes designing and facilitating the Diversity Leadership Academies. She is also a senior consultant at the Future Work Institute.

Andrea works with interactive theater groups coaching actors, co-writing scripts and facilitating diversity related scenes with corporate clients.

She has been a guest speaker on community radio. She co-authored a Diversity Toolkit: City Cares, for the American Institute for Managing Diversity; the Giraffe & Elephant Workbook Series, and an article: Housework: The Art of Managing Diversity.

Ms. Cisco received a BA in Sociology from Hunter College CUNY and an MS in Education from Long Island University.

Clients have used RTCT for creating informed and constructive dialogue in union settings, coaching sessions, at staff meetings and during strategic thinking and planning meetings.

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