

How to succeed with managing cultural diversity

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Middle management plays a key role when a company wants to improve the management of diversity. What characterises the success stories?

An ever-increasing number of organisations in both the private and public sectors are hiring immigrants with both Western and non-Western backgrounds.

This has resulted in making diversity management a hot topic in working life. How can organisations best utilise the potential inherent in this diversity, and prevent it from creating negative contrasts between different groups of employees?

Many enterprises have therefore adopted well-intentioned measures to improve diversity management and have made considerable investments in putting these measures into action. Unfortunately, not all measures have yielded the desired results.

“Middle management plays a decisive role in the success of measures to promote diversity management. Middle managers can promote measures, but they can also prevent them from being implemented,” says Gordana Abramovic.

Her doctoral project at BI Norwegian Business School has focused on finding out what characterises middle managers who succeed in using measures to promote diversity management.

Spotlight on middle management

Abramovic has conducted two different studies to help find answers to what can be done to succeed in managing employees with different nationalities.

In the first survey, she asked Norwegian employees in various companies about their opinions of a specific diversity measure aimed at people with a non-Western background. 385 people responded.

Abramovic found three characteristics among the participants that are positive as regards supporting the diversity measure:

They already have positive experiences from contact with immigrants.

They take a positive view of the value of diversity.

They are not only concerned with themselves, they also care about the goals and ambitions of others.

The study shows that women and older employees are the most likely to support the outlined diversity measure.

The organisational researcher proposes the following explanation:

“Women have had to fight for their rights themselves, while older employees may be more concerned with their reputation than younger employees.”

Feeling included

In the second study, Abramovic interviewed middle managers and their subordinates to find out which middle managers make their foreign employees feel included in the workplace.

The results support the findings in the first survey.

Employees feel more included in the workplace if the manager has already had positive experiences with immigrants. They also feel more included if the manager shows an interest in the goals and ambitions of others.

“I also found that immigrants who experience support from their immediate supervisor, build a stronger connection to the workplace.”

Could go from bad to worse

“It’s bad enough that investments in measures to promote diversity don’t always yield the desired results. They can actually make a bad situation worse,” Abramovic warns.

Positive steps to promote diversity measures may evoke an awareness in the middle manager as regards which group he/she belongs to.

If the middle manager has predisposed attitudes toward certain demographic groups, a diversity measure may awaken the prejudices. In practice, it may result in favourisation of certain groups at the expense of others.

Advice for managers

Gordana Abramovic has two practical pieces of advice for managers who want to succeed in diversity management:

Create arenas where middle managers and employees can get to know each other better and have positive experiences in informal situations as well.

In connection with promotions and recruitment: Look for candidates that have positive experiences with others, are concerned with the goals and ambitions of others and can support their co-workers.

Reference:

Gordana Abramovic. “*Effective Diversity Management on the Line – Who and How? On the role of line managers in organisations with diverse workforce*”. Series of Dissertation - 08/2016. Handelshøyskolen BI.

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