



# DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NECESSARY

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South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy this year. As an aspect of democracy, **Cherice Smith** looks at the developments and drawbacks of diversity in the workplace these past two decades.

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**I**t is twenty years since the end of apartheid rule in South Africa and the opening up of our society. In the past, certain groups were excluded from mainstream economic and societal activities. Discrimination was rife – based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and disability.

Now, there is a huge drive – not only in South Africa but all over the world – to include people of diverse backgrounds in the workplace and to include everybody in the activities of society.

“Over 51% of the population of most countries consist of women – in South Africa as well. How can you exclude people because of their gender, sexual orientation and other differences? It does not benefit your society, your markets or your day-to-day life,” says Dr Babita Mathur-Helm, from the University of Stellenbosch Business School’s Centre for Leadership Studies, who is also a senior lecturer in Leadership, Multicultural and Gender Diversity and Sensitivity at USB.

“While South Africa has come a long way in terms of diversifying the workplace,

it has not come far enough to say we have reached our final goals. We still have to work on changing people’s mind-sets and we have to create more leaders who have the courage and confidence to accept cultural and social differences.”

### Changing the way we think

Reflecting on the journey to build a healthy plural democracy in South Africa, Dr Dorrian Aiken explains that understanding diversity and the human response to it, and therefore knowing how to approach the management of diversity, is a territory that has grown in complexity. This complexity can partly be ascribed to research on the functioning of our brains. Dr Aiken is a consultant, lecturer and leader in the field of coaching, organisational transformation and leadership development.

“David Rock and Dan Radecki point out that current modern lifestyle and its demands have outpaced the evolution of parts of our brain, in particular the limbic brain (Rock & Radecki, *Why race still matters in the workplace*, June 1, 2012).

## ‘Brain patterns can change in days, rather than weeks or months, but only with focused and repetitive practice that engages our senses ...’

This area of the brain is geared to fight or flight in under a fifth of a second, a necessary survival response to the presence of life-threatening danger. We react with intensity to uncertainty and to events that are unfamiliar to our experiences.

“Research by Elizabeth Phelps and colleagues has suggested that the brain responds to people of different racial groups. However, it is much more likely that the brain responds to what is unfamiliar and, as in the case of race in South Africa, has had deeply reinforced learned messages about racial difference. Rock and Radecki report on research that shows: ‘If I perceive you as similar to me simply based on race, then my brain will react with more empathy or compassion than if you were of a different race, and this occurs without us even realising it.’”

The limbic brain also houses the processes for explicit and implicit memory, explains Dr Aiken.

“Explicit memory is informational input – it starts at birth, peaks in midlife and tends to weaken and fade with old age. Implicit memory, by contrast, is the storing of emotions and assumptions from a very early age. A consequence of its activity is that unless we are surrounded with healthy messages and frequent positive exposure to racial and other differences from an early age, it is possible to grow into adulthood with erroneous generalisations about a whole range of diversity.”

There is a danger of a reductionist assumption that if our brains are wired to react to difference, there is little we can do about it, says Dr Aiken.

“Such an assumption supports the notion that birds of a feather are *meant* to flock together. However, brain-based research has shown that our brains are immensely capable of new learning – at any age. Neuroplasticity is the ability of our brain’s neural pathways to acquire new patterns, to override untrue limiting assumptions about others based on difference, and to relearn evidentially more accurate responses to difference. This is not only infinitely possible, it is probably the most important practice in which our organisations could invest.”

*Practice* is the operative word.

“Brain patterns can change in days, rather than weeks or months, but only with focused and repetitive practice that engages our senses – particularly mindfulness practice. The more we are able to raise into consciousness our own beliefs and prejudices, the more we are able to recognise the unwritten bias in our families, communities, teams or organisational cultures. We will also be more willing to engage in the feelings and experiences of others who may be on the receiving end of prejudice, and it becomes easier to bring about acceptance towards difference in our communities and workplaces.”

According to Dr Aiken nothing could be more important than visiting and revisit-

ing the challenges of transformation in attitudes to diversity in South African organisations today.

“In over a decade of working in the field, it is alarming to see how attitudes have hardened in recent years, and how many organisations have shut the door against continuing diversity interventions in the belief that the territory has been covered.”

### Implementing a diversity plan – for the right reasons

Dr Mathur-Helm is of the opinion that organisations are not always aware of why they want to have a diversity initiative, but they do this because they want to comply with government legislation.

“Many leaders are not sure why they want a diversity plan – as a regulatory compliance, as a social justice, as a responsibility of only part of the organisation such as HR, as part of a strategic planning outcome or as a community-focused activity. The variety of approaches from which organisations choose, shows that organisations vary in both the degree to which they define diversity as valuable and in the amount of change in which they engage to support workplace diversity. Hence, if organisations want to become successful, they must set implementation parameters by asking themselves three questions: Why do they want diversity and if so, what kind, and if so, how much?”

Dr Mathur-Helm says leaders in organi-





sations must have a passion for and commit themselves to the idea of diversity.

“We want leaders to have a vision for diversity in South Africa. If they are not completely convinced and committed, then it cannot happen. They’ve got to make a diversity plan or policy part of the vision of the organisation. They can create strategies and structures which can help with long-term success.”

### Creating an inclusive work environment

Dr Mathur-Helm comments that minority groups and all cultural groups within organisational structures need to be integrated so that people are well represented within the existing organisational culture and environment.

“Minority members should be fully integrated in the informal networks of the organisation – meeting in pubs and restaurants, talking in the corridors, playing golf together. Organisations must have zero tolerance for interpersonal conflict based on gender, nationality and other identity groups. They must have equal identification of all the diverse members in the organisational goals and opportunities for personal career-goal achievement.”

Monica du Toit, coordinator for the Centre of Inclusivity at Stellenbosch University, explains that individuals only allow professional development and growth when the various characteristics that make

people unique or different are included in the various ways of doing things in the work culture.

“We could therefore have a very diverse work corps, but a culture that only rewards certain practices or ways of doing things and that finds only these valuable, and that expects the work culture to assimilate into an existing culture.

“Inclusivity specifically refers to an institutional consideration and appreciation for the perspectives and contributions of all individuals. Therefore it requires that the workplace gives attention to how consultation, decision-making and power-sharing are enforced upon and experienced by employees. An inclusive culture is not a politically correct environment where no cultural practices are allowed. It is an environment in which the types of consultation make staff members feel welcome, appreciated, empowered and included.”

According to Du Toit, quick-fix activities that only encourage politically correct conduct and that do not nurture self-awareness and sensitivity in the workplace, as well as fear for the unknown and fear for the loss of power by those that bought into an old work culture, keep organisations from diversifying.

But certain South African organisations are doing well in terms of inclusivity and diversifying their workplaces.

“Woolworths, ABSA, Safmarine and SAB Miller are some of these organisa-

tions. They have diverse staff members, the highest number of black employees and training programmes. They make sure that their people are well developed, that they have succession planning and that they reach their succession goals. They are really helping people to progress. And this can only enhance the excellence of an organisation,” explains Dr Mathur-Helm.

### Accepting the value of diversity

Dr Mathur-Helm concludes by saying research proves that the more diversity you have in your organisation – a variety of opinions, ideas and views – the more you will be able to progress.

“Research has shown that racial diversity has in many instances enhanced the exchange of information and improved the quality of decisions. Moreover, work teams with diverse educational backgrounds were found to be highly creative and innovative if they exploited their points of diversity. Hence, if properly managed, a diverse workforce can be of immense value to the organisation.”<sup>a</sup>



LEFT TO RIGHT: Dr Babita Mathur-Helm, from USB’s Centre for Leadership Studies and senior lecturer in Leadership, Multicultural and Gender Diversity and Sensitivity at USB and Dr Dorrian Aiken, consultant, lecturer and leader in the field of coaching, organisational transformation and leadership development.

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