Developing a Human Resources Culture of Data and Analytics

Developing a Human Resources culture that is anchored in HR data and analytics is a process. It is a journey over time that moves HR from reporting to analytics.

Organizational cultural competency is frequently defined as the ability to communicate and productively interact with people in a multicultural workforce or in a diverse global setting. However, it goes deeper than that because cultural competency has many dimensions.

It is a mind-set based on real respect for other cultural perspectives. It is knowledge and awareness of differences that is used to tear down barriers of communication to achieve comfort with uncertainty. Cultural competency also means having the ability to recognize and capitalize on similarities in order to cross the cultural divide.

Organizations are realizing through trial-and-error that cultural competency is not about assimilation and erasing cultural differences, and this realization is driving more effective employee training and development strategies.

Appreciation Rather than Assimilation

It is a flat world in which globalization and multiculturalism have become the norm, making cultural competency a critical success factor.

Cultural competency refers to communication skills but also incorporates work skills. Recruiters must be able to interpret skills and capabilities expressed in cultural terms. Human Resources needs the ability to offer culturally focused development opportunities for employees. Organizations need a supportive culture and systems that encourage the expression of creativity. This puts the onus on businesses to create an atmosphere of appreciation for, rather than an assimilation of, differences.

How many organizations truly understand the impact that globalization and cultural differences have on their communication systems, modes of operation, and workforce?

In the U.S. it has become organizationally correct to claim cultural competency, but many members of the corporate workforce are actually trying to balance political correctness with true understanding. They are afraid to admit their lack of competency in understanding and dealing with different cultures. One of the signs this situation exists is when corporate leaders continue to deal with cultural-focused problems after investing in sophisticated training and development programs.

Cultural competency is not Affirmative Action though it is easy to confuse the two. The U.S. originally focused on quotas to drive the hiring and retention of minorities and women, while Europe and

other countries did not embrace the concept. Though quotas are not a legally accepted practice anymore, the concept marred the understanding of cultural differentiation in a globalized business environment.

Culture is not just about race, gender, religion or ethnicity. It is a system of beliefs and values and behaviors that drive decision-making, feelings, responses, perspectives, and interactions with other people. Cultural influences make each person unique no matter what color or race or gender that person may be.

U.S. organizations are going through a transformation in their understanding of cultural competency because concepts like color blindness have led to people believing that recognizing differences is discriminatory when in fact it is not necessarily so.

Not a Question of 'Better'

There are two sources of cultural differences. One is in the multicultural workforce. The second is culture across countries.

Organizations experiencing difficulties with cultural diversity at either level should assess their recognition of cultural differences by asking critical questions of itself. First, how ethnocentric is the organization? There are numerous examples of companies expanding into foreign countries, only to fail due to lack of cultural understanding and a bias that says the domestic culture is better than the foreign culture.

A second question is the level of cultural flexibility. Are employees willing to recognize that there are cultural differences, and the differences do not represent something "wrong"? Differences are to be accepted and valued for what they offer in the way of new perspectives and ideas. A third question is how tolerant is the organization of the cultural differences?

To develop cultural competency, it is necessary to understand that culture is more than diversity. Diversity refers to different characteristics, while culture determines people's values, behaviors, communication styles, decision-making, and social behaviors. Culture includes the traditional diversity factors of race, gender, and so on, but it also includes sexual orientation, socio-economic factors, political status, education, location, disabilities, veteran or military status, and many other factors. Also, within each culture are sub-cultures, adding further complexity.

Reducing Miscues Through Training

With so many factors involved, it is not hard to imagine how cultural misunderstandings, miscues and miscommunications occur. Add them together and working relationships between employees, and employees and customers are damaged. Effective cultural competency training focuses on helping people understand cultural influences and personal perspectives in order to improve communication.

An example is Boeing. Boeing operates in 28 countries, and workers and their families are given personalized, one-on-one cultural sensitivity training. To embed cultural awareness in the organization, Boeing manages an employee rotation program in which overseas employees work in the U.S. for nine to 18 months. Other activities include structured classroom training, culture discussions in lunch-and-learn sessions, and twice-a-year diversity summits. One of the reasons Boeing does one-on-one training is to ensure the employee understands the importance of the content. Also producing great value are Employee Resource Groups, interactive instruction and training customized to a particular location.

The training cannot simply inform people about cultural differences. Leaders need to learn how to resolve common issues, like delivering critical feedback, building trust and understanding culturally-based body language or expressions.

Westerners generally need training in determining the ideal behaviors based on situations. For example, sometimes it is much better to cultivate a relationship rather than jump into business negotiations.

Measuring Learning Outcomes

What kind of outcomes are expected from training and development programs? Measurements should assess the ability of leaders to manage in a multicultural environment. They should think critically, analyze situations, synthesize training and experiences, and make good decisions. All employees should be able to communicate and interact with a diverse group of stakeholders that includes peers, co-workers, customers and clients, business associates, government officials, and so on. Interactive training programs are useful for analyzing decision-making in a multicultural and global setting. Employee surveys are another effective measurement tool.

Identifying differences in cultures is only a first step. An equally important step is learning how to assess the differences and recognizing the value proposition within the context of the corporate culture.

Cultural competency is not about assimilation. It is about maintaining cultural diversity in a productive and respectful manner so the organization benefits from the rich variety of perspectives and creative thinking.