Eliminating Discrimination in Organizations: The Role of Organizational Strategy for Diversity Management

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Lindsey, King, Dunleavy, McCausland, and Jones (2013) describe several individual and organizational strategies for eliminating workplace discrimination. Although these are important and valuable suggestions, I would argue that their list should be improved with an important extension: Organizations should be encouraged to focus their attention on the organization’s strategic approach to diversity management. Macrolevel forces of strategy occupy a critical role for supporting diversity beyond implementing policies at the organizational level such as diversity training programs, compensation packages, and career development programs. Organizations are more likely to effectively eliminate discrimination when they incorporate macrolevel factors in conjunction with the strategies mentioned by Lindsey et al.

At the same time, practitioners must recognize that an organization’s strategic
stance toward diversity can promote discrimination through a variety of manifestations depending on the organization’s strategic model of diversity, often derived from an overall cultural ideology (e.g., colorblindness or multiculturalism). It is not the purpose of this commentary to advocate for a particular ideological approach but rather point out the importance of adopting a strategic management approach and the pitfalls of failing to consider how grounding diversity models in particular cultural ideologies might also lead to unintended negative consequences, including perceptions of exclusion, diversity resistance, and discrimination. Organizations often are not aware of the potential negative consequences they may be imposing on their workforce when creating their strategies around diversity, despite having good intentions of supporting diversity in the workplace. This commentary serves as a call to action for scholars and practitioners to develop and test strategic models of diversity.

**Strategic Approaches to Diversity Management**

A strategic approach to diversity presents a broadly shared sense of organizational direction and purpose around diversity while also providing a framework for the organization’s diversity-related missions and goals. Most importantly, the strategy outlines how an organization defines diversity and is often represented in explicit strategic plans, mission, or vision statements. With an established corporate diversity management strategy, diversity initiatives become aligned with organizational policies, procedures, and practices. Such alignment reinforces an organizational culture that encourages the effective management of all employees and communicates the extent to which fostering diversity and eliminating discrimination are priorities in the organization.

The organizational and social psychology literatures have generally identified two predominant cultural ideologies that typically inform the strategies for managing diversity: the color blind approach and multiculturalism (Park & Judd, 2005; Plaut, 2010; Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011; Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). These two cultural ideologies represent implicit and explicit systems of ideas, meanings, and procedures that suggest how individuals from different demographic groups should accommodate one another and how to organize a diverse workforce efficiently (Berry, 1984; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Plaut, 2002; Plaut et al., 2011). Multiculturalism emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and celebrating group differences, whereas color blindness maintains that group differences should be ignored and that individuals are essentially the same. Although both of these are broad ideologies that are generally applied at the organizational level and function to advocate for equality in the workplace, organizations need to be aware that utilizing either as an overarching framework for creating a strategic approach to diversity management may result in the unintentional promotion of discrimination through their diversity strategy. Research has shown that there are consequences for both majority and minority group members in workplaces under both cultural ideologies. The next sections highlight how each of these cultural ideologies function to influence both majority and minority group members through perceptions of exclusion, diversity resistance, and discrimination. I conclude with a brief outline of promising alternative approaches to the integration of diversity management at the strategic level.

**Color Blind Strategic Approach to Diversity**

The color blind approach to organizational diversity is the predominant model for diversity in American society and organizations (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010; Thomas & Ely, 1996). This model is often associated with American
cultural ideals of individualism, meritocracy, equality, and assimilation; centers around minimizing individual differences and group identities; and emphasizes that people are universally similar (Plaut, 2002; Thomas & Ely, 1996; Thomas, Mack, & Montagliani, 2004). Although the intent for organizations that employ diversity strategies based on the colorblind approach is to provide equal opportunity and eliminate discrimination, ironically, organizations may foster discrimination through their promotion of a colorblind approach to diversity. Research has demonstrated a variety of negative consequences of the color blind diversity approach including the justification of group-based inequality (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008), a decreased likelihood of detecting and reporting overt instances of racial discrimination (Apfelbaum et al., 2010), stronger racial bias and interpersonal discrimination among Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006), greater amounts of perceived racial prejudice by minorities (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), higher levels of discomfort and distrust of the organization among African Americans (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008), lower levels of psychological engagement among minorities (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009), and lower work group effectiveness (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Moreover, such an approach pressures minorities to assimilate to the majority group and suppresses behaviors associated with their demographic group memberships that are not in line with the norms of the majority group. This type of pressure prevents minority groups from fully using the perspectives of their unique demographic group memberships. The color blind approach can deny the reality of employee’s social identities, and this approach may also reduce the sensitivity of meaningful group differences and ignore the ways in which these differences might help to coordinate or shape the organization’s work policies, practices, and procedures (Purdie-Vaughns & Ditlmann, 2010). Thomas and Ely (1996) argue that in limiting employee’s capabilities to acknowledge openly their work-related but culturally based differences, the colorblind approach may actually undermine the organization’s capacity to learn about and improve its own strategies, processes, and practices. Based on this literature, it would seem that organizational efforts to support equality through a strategic approach to diversity via color blindness may promote inequality and discrimination instead.

Multicultural Approach to Diversity

In contrast, the multicultural approach to organizational diversity acknowledges differences among groups and maintains that the differences associated with demographic and social identities should be valued, celebrated, and recognized as a source of strength (Cox, 1991). Research has shown that majority group members who endorse or are exposed to multiculturalism tend to evaluate racial and ethnic minorities more positively, exhibit lower levels of prejudice, interact more effectively with members of other races and ethnicities, and promote more inclusive behaviors and social policies than individuals who endorse or are exposed to colorblind ideologies (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Verkuyten, 2005; Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009; Wolsko et al., 2006). The research on multiculturalism has also shown positive benefits for minorities in organizations including greater psychological engagement and organizational learning and effectiveness (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Plaut et al., 2009). However, despite the positive outcomes associated with multiculturalism on intergroup relations, this perspective has generated backlash under the presumption that multiculturalism can promote perceptions of exclusion. Supporting this assertion, recent research by Plaut and colleagues (2011) provided evidence that Whites show implicit and
explicit associations between multiculturalism and exclusion. Their series of five studies showed that Whites’ reactions to multiculturalism are rooted in the psychological need for inclusion and belonging and that Whites implicitly associate multiculturalism with exclusion rather than inclusion as they generally perceive that multiculturalism is for the benefit of minority group members. The results of Plaut et al.’s study (2011) support that multiculturalism is not perceived as inclusive by Whites and helps to account for Whites’ resistance to advocating for multiculturalism diversity efforts in organizations. Interestingly, Morrison, Plaut, and Ybarra (2010) demonstrated that multiculturalism elicits prejudice and endorsement of group-based dominance among highly identified White Americans, and other research shows that Whites have a tendency to avoid and resist multiculturalism in favor of color blind diversity policies in organizations (James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Thomas et al., 2004). Research has also shown that majority group members who are exposed to messages advocating a multicultural ideological approach to improving interethic relations show more activation of stereotypes associated with minorities and also are more likely to use demographic categories, including race, when making judgments of other individuals (Wolsko et al., 2000). Conversely, minority employees may actually feel exploited by organizations that utilize their unique group memberships to their advantage and place them into jobs that fit their “niche” or cultural background (e.g., a Latino employee being offered only accounts from South American clients) while neglecting to provide developmental assignments and opportunities in other parts of the organization (Thomas & Ely, 1996). This research suggests that even when companies are promoting a strategic approach to diversity via multiculturalism throughout the workplace, perceptions of discrimination and exclusion can occur.

Opportunities for Organizations

The review of the literature around colorblindness and multiculturalism illustrates how macrolevel forces including predominant cultural ideologies around diversity can influence organizational diversity and equality goals. Although the multicultural approach tends to produce more favorable results, organizations must be aware that neither strategic approach to diversity is perceived by all employees as affirming their sense of inclusion and belonging within the organization, and both can promote stereotyping and increase resistance to diversity efforts. Backlash against diversity efforts may be manifested in the forms of discriminatory human resource policies, practices, and procedures: cultures of silence around inequities: and interpersonal discrimination and harassment (Thomas & Plaut, 2008).

In order to overcome some of the challenges inherent in the colorblind and multicultural ideologies, diversity scholars have recently proposed additional models of diversity that do not face resistance and include both nonminority and minority employees. One such model, closely tied to the multicultural ideological approach, is the all-inclusive multiculturalism (AIM) approach. This model highlights that diversity includes all employees, both minorities and nonminorities (Stevens et al., 2008). This approach for integrating diversity into organizational strategy recognizes the importance of demographic group identities in the workplace experiences of employees but explicitly advocates this message equally across members of all demographic groups. The AIM approach includes nonminorities by speaking directly to their concerns of social exclusion from diversity efforts. Other researchers have described another strategic level approach to diversity, termed “identity safety” (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Purdie-Vaughns & Dittmann, 2010; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). Identity safe workplace environments try to identify the identity threats in the environment that are unique to each social or demographic group in the organization.
and ameliorate the ways in which these identity threats impact employees. In identity safe organizational environments, the experiences and outcomes of employees are determined by employees’ interests and talents, and in situations where their group membership is relevant, their group identity would be a source of advantage and value instead of disadvantage and threat (Purdie-Vaughns & Ditlmann, 2010).

References


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