

Can the HRIS Project Teach Us About How to Manage Diversity and Change?

“How do we integrate diversity into our daily work and what impact does it have on our effectiveness?”

I often get asked this question and have found it difficult to provide an adequate answer. Yet, if CARE as an organization wants to fully integrate diversity into everything we do, we must be able to articulate how this can be done, and what value it adds. With this in mind, I decided to examine a project that I felt could provide some answers. I chose the implementation of the new Human Resource Information System (HRIS), because while one would not normally associate this project with diversity, it was a project that involved a diverse team from across the organization. The team was diverse in all respects: gender, ethnicity, background, position and experience within the organization, and technical function. I was curious to discover if there were some important lessons from this project about diversity.

How did team members describe the value of this project?

I began my inquiry by asking the team members how they felt about the project and how they understood its goals and objectives as well as their roles and contributions. The team members spoke about how the project would help to build a global information system that would facilitate better management of human resource information. They all highlighted their appreciation for learning how to document processes, undertake analysis of underlying problems, and identify appropriate solutions. Even more interesting was that team members were clear about their roles, their contribution, and what was expected of them.

They all also proudly noted that they built stronger relationships with each other, and gained a better appreciation for one another's contribution. Despite many long hours of work and multiple deadlines, no one expressed anger or discontent with the way the project was managed, and they proudly highlighted that they completed the project on schedule and within budget.

One could think, “This sounds like a well managed project. What is unique about this? Isn't this the way we should do things?” Well, yes, it is the way things should be done. But it is not often the case. So, I wanted to understand what made this project such a success, not only for its results, but for how team members felt about their work and each other.

What contributed to success?

Upon examining the project more deeply, I began to see how the leadership style, the quality of relationships, and the process of managing change made a significant impact. When asked what contributed to success, team members were very quick to associate their sense of accomplishment and success to the leadership style of the Project Manager, Cathy Shipley. She was viewed as a facilitator of change, rather than purely as a technology expert.

What did her facilitative leadership look like?

An important first step for Cathy was the careful consideration of who needed to be on the team. She undertook an extensive assessment of key stakeholders and the broader organizational context and, based on this analysis, formulated her plan. As a result, the team was a diverse group of staff from different levels of the organization. Two sub-teams were formed to ensure that diversity of functions, experience, backgrounds and position in the organization were contributing to the project. The first was

a cross-divisional steering committee of key senior level staff who functioned as advisors, sponsors, and decision-makers for the project. This was to ensure that the project would not be viewed solely as a human resource initiative but as a cross-divisional effort, and that staff in all parts of the organization would own the project. A second “core” team of functional experts was to carry forward the day-to-day responsibilities of the project. While there was no deliberate effort to ensure ethnic or gender diversity in either of these teams, both were very diverse in these areas.

Cathy chose a technical consultant for the project who not only was a technology expert but also had significant expertise in process and change management. Cathy made deliberate efforts to tap into these skills. She also spent a significant amount of extra time developing relationships with key individuals in the team to understand how each member could contribute to the process.

Team members were quick to point out that from the inception of the project Cathy paid careful attention to the quality of the relationships in the group. She spent time listening and coaching staff. She knew that while each team member was identified for their professional expertise and their function, adequate time would be needed to build their skill and capacity to manage the intricacies of the project. She understood the value of coaching team members to ensure they knew the goals of the project and their roles in contributing to these goals. In order to build respect for each other, she deliberately created and facilitated processes in which staff would have to coach each other, learn from each other through joint projects, see each other as a resource, and spend significant amount of time together.

Cathy created a designated space for the team to work together for an intense six-

month period. She intentionally took them out of the silos in which they customarily worked. Initially, staff would not consult each other and it took deliberate facilitation by Cathy to demonstrate the value of teamwork and collaboration.

Everyone on the team had equal value. Importantly, some team members shared with me that their confidence in themselves and their ability to contribute to CARE dramatically increased as a result of participating in this project. In the past, they said no one asked for their opinion, yet in this project their opinion was of value. They felt they were given the opportunity to contribute fully to the process because they were listened to, valued, given the opportunity to voice their concerns, and treated with respect. There was space for new ideas to be proposed, and this made the work fulfilling. Staff felt appreciated and rewarded for their efforts.

Was diversity and change management training helpful?

I had to ask whether any of the diversity training or change management training offered by L&OD contributed to the process. Cathy said she immediately recognized that diversity was not a separate activity, and challenged herself to ensure that in her every day work she would incorporate the principles around diversity and change management. Notably, she was aware of the historical tensions and personality disagreements between team members and she recognized that, if not managed carefully, these could negatively impact the effectiveness of the team. She understood that people brought with them not only their expertise, but also their emotions and assumptions about each other, and she paid careful attention to these dynamics in her management style. She spent time thinking through how she could create deliberate processes to help her team members

appreciate one another. She spent a lot of time in reflection and analysis of the process in order to build her own capacity to be an effective facilitator.

So what can we learn?

Regardless of the type of project one develops, the process in which it is managed is vital to enhancing effectiveness and reaping the full benefits of diversity. It is in the process that diversity becomes a part of the work.

- The diversity of individuals who participate in the project plays a significant role. Diversity in position and authority, division, functional expertise, background and skill all contribute to the potential of building a variety of relationships across the organization that make us more effective, creative and, in the end, more satisfied about our own work.
- Facilitative leadership plays an important factor in creating the right environment for a diverse team to fully contribute. The ability of a leader to view him or herself as a “facilitator rather than an “expert”, and to listen and coach others to build their capacity as leaders is clearly vital.
- An appreciation for the quality of relationships and the creation of a conscious and deliberate process to build relationships cannot be underestimated. One should not purely focus on the task at hand, but also on the dynamics within the team--the assumptions, personalities, backgrounds and experiences that come with each individual—that play a part in effectiveness. This requires careful attention to how each individual brings a unique contribution to the task, recognition of and confidence

in each individual’s potential, and respect for all.

- Importantly, any process requires time. Time needs to be spent building skills and capacity and communicating consistently the goals and objectives of a project in order for individuals to connect their role to broader organizational goals. Time is needed to reflect, learn, and build relationships.

As one team member stated – “it is the process that makes the system work.” So when we ask ourselves how to integrate diversity into our daily work and what impact it has, I can now say: it is in how we work together and the process we develop to do that, as well as the value we give to each other’s capability that will heighten our effectiveness, and make diversity meaningful.

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