

The Influence of Culture on Human Resource Management¹

by Laraine Kaminsky

Your organization is filling a very specific job and the list has been narrowed to two suitable candidates. The first interview didn't go as planned.

The candidate, a newcomer to Canada, didn't shake your hand when they entered, never looked you in the eye, and was reluctant to talk about past accomplishments. The second interview went much better. The candidate walked in confidently, answered the questions directly and mid-way through the interview you were sidetracked talking about mutual interests. Both candidates were qualified on paper, but it was the second interviewee that became the new hire. While this story is exaggerated, the situation is not uncommon.

In the scenario above, the action of the hiring manager is not an example of prejudice, but of human nature. Columbia University School of Business Professor Michael Morris believes that it is the result of one of the strongest patterns of social science. Morris said, "in many subtle ways, we tend to favour people who are similar to us."

In a culturally diverse country like Canada, which is becoming more diverse every day, overcoming that characteristic of human nature is essential to success in human resource management.

Culture and the HR Cycle

Culture impacts on every stage of the HR cycle, from selection and recruitment, to feedback, evaluation, coaching, and exit interviews.

While all of the different HR functions are commonplace to those who have lived and worked in Canada for a long time, they are still foreign for newcomers. This presents the additional challenge of communicating the value of the different functions, as well as performing them.

The beginning of this article focused on selection, but similar tales of cultural miscommunication can be told for every different aspect of the HR cycle. Exit interviews with no new information because the employee does not want to cause the company to lose face. An overly complimentary evaluation leading to an employee's embarrassment and withdrawal from the work team. Each of these represent more examples of what may happen when communicating across cultures.

Overcoming Cultural Differences

The key strategy for working in a culturally diverse organization is to be aware that cultural differences exist. It is impossible to know cultural norms from every different culture represented in your company, but to be aware of the existence of those norms is essential.

"A (manager) who interprets employees from different cultural groups without awareness of cultural norms can miss or misread important signals in their communication," said Prof. Morris.

The inability to read these signals can lead to employee dissatisfaction, increased turnover and decreased productivity. If properly managed, culturally diverse workplaces can be more dynamic, more creative and more productive than a homogeneous one, but without cultural awareness, those results will never be attained.

In today's competitive economy it is often a race to find the most talented employees. With the culturally diverse population of Canada, these potential employees can come from many different cultural backgrounds. Having the awareness to recruit them, select them and retain them, could be the difference between your organization having that talent, or the competitors benefiting from it.

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