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The Effects of the Positive Deviance Approach on Cultural Diversity Management

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Abstract

In this paper we try to examine the potentials of the Positive Deviance (PD) approach as a tool for a successful implementation of cultural diversity in an organizational context in German enterprises.

Due to the growing diversity and individualities in societies (Becker & Seidel 2006), which can also be seen in more and more diverse teams, a successful (cultural) diversity management is needed. In Germany exists a growing need for skilled employees and executives which cannot be covered by the decreasing population. Therefore the employment of skilled workers from bordering countries or migrants is needed. The enterprises have the necessity to implement a working cultural diversity management to cover the needs of the company as well as those of their employees.

Deviance refers to intentional behaviors. This behavior differs from organizational norms that threaten the well-being of an organization, its members, or both (Bennett & Robinson 2000). Therefore positive deviance refers to behavior that shows a more effective examination with difficult situations, like religious or cultural traditions affecting the workplace behavior, e.g. the Friday prayer of Muslim coworkers. In the beginning this approach was mainly used for social change projects, e.g. by Sternin and Sternin (University n.d.) from Tufts University to decrease the malnutrition of children in Vietnam. Further research implicates a use of this concept also in organizational context. It is a useful tool which is also used in health care projects, e.g. to decrease the infection with certain germs in the day-to-day working context in hospitals.

From our point of view, the use of the positive deviance approach brings a number of positive low cost effects to implement a successful cultural diversity management in enterprises. Additionally the effects on the organizational culture have to be proven. Both these points will be discussed in the paper.

Purpose:

The purpose of the paper is to identify the added value the positive deviance approach can give for a successful implementation and/or usage of Cultural Diversity Management in enterprises.

Design:

Literature review

Findings:

Positive Deviance gives low cost effects for the implementation of Cultural Diversity Management

Research limitations/implications:

The results only base on literature review and need to be tested and validated in enterprises.

Practical implications:

Positive Deviance is an approach that can be used not only in social change in large communities but also in cultural change processes in limited groups in an organisational setting

What is original/ what is the value of the paper?

Identification of potentials of the positive deviance approach in organisational setting

Keywords: Positive Deviance, Cultural Diversity Management, change process

Introduction and conceptualization

The idea for this paper resulted from ongoing thoughts based on a master thesis by Sahr (Sahr 2012) who was dealing with the idea of putting the positive deviance approach into the context of organizational change processes. Another diploma thesis by Fink (Fink 2012) was dealing with the methods of Storytelling and Lego Serious Play™. Our understanding of the positive deviance approach is mainly influenced by the work of Lapping, Sternin, Singhal et al. (Lapping et al. 2002) as a successful tool for social change projects worldwide, as explained later. Additionally we see diversity management as a tool for change in organizations on the level of Human Resource Development.

In this paper we want to examine to which extent the positive deviance approach can be used as a tool for effective cultural diversity management in organizations. We will evaluate how the positive deviance approach has to be implemented to give a positive impact on diversity management activities in the enterprises¹. Therefore we will firstly define the expressions diversity management² with cultural diversity management as a special case within the whole complex discussion about DiM. In the next step we will describe the impacts a diverse team has on the success of the company. Our position is that for a successful implementation of DiM on the workplace a positive deviant behavior is essential. After explaining these basic concepts we will define and analyze positive deviant behavior and identify the most effective modes of positive deviant workplace behavior.

Cultural diversity management

In times of globalization all enterprises have to face a growing pressure to become more intercultural in terms of team composition. Mor Barak (Mor Barak 2011) describes the expression “managing diversity” or Diversity Management very metaphorical, therefore

“effective diversity management should encompass [...] four principles: (a) like scholars, managers must adopt an ethical learned approach to diversity, always aiming to ‘do the right thing’; (b) like farmers, they must respect their employees’ unique characteristics; and (c) like artisans, they must introduce creative solutions as they strive for excellence in diversity management. These qualities combined with the last principle – ambition to utilize diversity to promote business goals and profitability for the organization – lay the groundwork for sound management.”

The need for diversity management has several reasons depending on the country or region where the organization is based. US-American enterprises have to fulfill affirmative-action plans or South African companies have to follow the governmental restriction given through

¹ When speaking about organizations we always refer to profit oriented enterprises

² The abbreviation DiM for Diversity Management is widely used in the academic discussion, therefore we will use it in the text

the BBE³. Both are legal restrictions for that force the organizations to establish and enable diversity management within the organization. German companies face completely different problems, e.g. the lack of skilled workers. Because of this Germany (and other European countries as well) has to employ foreign worker to fulfill the requirements of the industry.

There are several discussions (Vedder 2006) about to which extend diversity management is necessary for the fulfillment of the organizations' tasks. Before going into more detail of several aspects of diversity management and cultural diversity management, we want to define it.

Cox (Cox 1993) defined diversity management as “planning and implementing organizational systems and practices to manage people so that the potential advantages of diversity are maximized while its potential disadvantages are minimized.” This is one of the first definitions of diversity management found in literature. For our understanding it summarizes the idea of diversity management completely. It always has to be kept in mind that the individualization of the society needs to be set into context as well. The dimensions of diversity can be defined on different levels (Vedder 2006). The most common differentiations referred to in research are the following:

- gender
- age
- race and ethnicity
- sexual orientation
- disabilities

Vedder (Vedder 2006) identified them as demographic core dimensions. In his work he also refers to external demographic dimensions (e.g. marital status, number of children, religion, etc) as well as to organizational dimensions like such as hierarchy or participation in a work council. The literature on diversity management mainly focuses on the demographic core competencies. In our paper we only deal with cultural diversity management as we see this as the most relevant kind of diversity management in the context of globalization.

Following Cox our definition of *cultural* diversity management is all “planning and implementing of organizational systems and practices to manage people so that the potential advantages of” *their cultural diversity* “are maximized while their potential disadvantages are minimized”.

³ Broad Black Economic Empowerment Enactment

Diversity management can be seen as a strategic instrument to increase the efficiency of the company. Vedder (Vedder 2006) argues that it is difficult to identify a direct connection between the implementation of diversity management and the (financial) success of the company. Yet he discussed six arguments for the use of (cultural) diversity management in enterprises which will be explained briefly in the following. (a) The argument of costs: A lack of appreciation on the one hand and discrimination on the other hand has a negative input on motivation and the outcome of the work. The dominant group of workers uses the work force to integrate, and therefore the dominated group (the culturally different staff) is strongly involved into the work processes and a better outcome is predicted. In our understanding, positive deviant behavior on the workplace will decrease those negative effects on the motivation and job satisfaction of the dominated group of culturally different staff. (b) The argument of marketing: a cultural diverse enterprise has better possibilities to adapt to the different cultural customers and markets because they are aware of the needs of their customers through the knowledge of their workers with different cultural backgrounds. (c) The argument of personnel marketing: An enterprise which is successfully implementing is attractive for workers from different cultural backgrounds. The potentially new staff is highly attracted to apply for positions within culturally diverse enterprises so the companies have a bigger variety of skilled workers to choose from for their tasks. (d) The argument of flexibility: diversity management supports alternative thinking and the combination of existing knowledge with new alternative approaches. In our understanding by creating a mutual and shared understanding, as explained later, a positive deviant behavior has a positive impact on the success of the enterprise. (e) The argument of creativity: as also argued by Bassett-Jones (Bassett-Jones 2005) “diversity is a “recognizable source of creativity and innovation that can provide a basis for competitive advantage”. (f) The argument of problem solving: there are proofs that homogeneous groups solve tasks and problems faster than heterogeneous ones but is also proved that heterogeneous groups produce more creative and sustainable solutions. The reason for this is seen in the wider background and knowledge base of diverse teams (Vedder 2006).

Thomas (Thomas 1995) defined eight models of how to react on diversity: exclusion, denial, depression, isolation, assimilation, tolerance, building up relationships and support of mutual adaptation. The last two models are the most common and positive ones to react on diversity in companies (Vedder 2006). Through building relationships social activities and trainings the participants' awareness for diverse topics is to be raised. Mutual adaptation should further a

constructive handling with diversity. But this insight does not explain proposals or methods of how this positive association with deviance can be implemented in an organizational context.

Due to the growing diversity and individualities in societies (Becker & Seidel 2006), which can also be seen in more and more diverse teams, a successful (cultural) diversity management is needed. But additionally due to the economic change, increasing internationalization and opening of new markets, the importance of innovative ability is also growing. Organizations rarely have an available instrument of innovation or an independent innovation management. Companies must adapt to permanent change, actively shape that change, and use opportunities for advancement (Pult 2007).

However, innovations do not develop out of themselves. Rather, they are results of learnable and controllable processes (Disselkamp 2005). The realization and control of innovation processes influences the ability to create sustainable innovations, use in-company resources and employ them for an improved competitiveness and innovation processes. Therefore there is an increasing pressure for innovation (Pfeiffer, Pult 2007)

In this connection, various approaches are needed which enable an innovative framework and which can also be established in companies. That means that companies should focus on the development of their competencies and the creation of work conditions that are conducive to learning and emphasize the culture of the companies in a positive way. So the companies should meet the challenge to generate corresponding workplace conditions for innovative abilities. In this connection the use of a positive workplace behavior and participative processes represent one possible positive approach. But what is meant by positive workplace behavior? In the following chapter we will deal with this topic more closely.

Positive workplace behavior

The field of positive organizational behavior notes that many constructs of organizational research such as positive reinforcement, procedural justice, job satisfaction, core self-evaluation and others are to give a renewed impact to this important approach which is based on traditional research methodologies and strategic theory-building processes: The “positive approach to the workplace” (Wright 2003); (Youssef & Luthans 2007); and the “positive organizational scholarship”. With reference to these studies there are three main components mentioned: *hope*, *optimism* and *resilience* that influence the positive workplace behavior (Youssef & Luthans 2007). According to the title of this paper we try to extend these three components with the positive deviance approach.

But what is meant by positive workplace behavior? One definition by Luthans (Luthans 2002) argues that the workplace behavior is “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans 2002). Luthans also mentioned that the capacity of the positive workplace framework must be theoretical and researched based that it can be measured as well as variable, that it is also open for change and development. But the contribution of traits in workplace behavior and performance tends to be indirect in the organizational outcome. This development needs time which is a main effective variable and should not be underestimated in workplace behavior.

The resource capacity *hope* is described as the power of will to achieve goals and according to Snyder 2000, includes the component of creativity of new paths to replace boundaries in the process of reaching the target. The relevant criteria of *optimism* of the approach of positive workplace behavior is understood by Youssef and Luthans 2007 as realistic, flexible, valid and significantly measurable which can be learned and developed during the working process. *Reliance* is defined by Luthans 2002 as “the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility” (Luthans 2002). In this connection reliance allows proactive learning and incorporates negative setbacks and positive overwhelming events. All of the three criteria include a self directed motivating mechanism and have a deep impact on working settings meeting the positive workplace behavior (Youssef & Luthans 2007)

According to Youssef and Luthans an employee gets a higher job performance, commitment to the company and job satisfaction as well as a greater work happiness through positivity. In this connection hope could give the employee the opportunity to receive a new position and an opportunity to increase experience and open perspectives. This leads to innovative ways to take advantages of opportunities. To take more credits or suppose less culpability could be induced by an optimistic explanation. Resilience could lead to more strategic mechanisms and effective mechanisms. Thus a positive viewing, learning and the integration of new experience could improve job satisfaction. This could lead to more happiness and well-being not only in the workplace environment: The positive approaches could spread perspectives and future orientations which could lead to a higher overall commitment in the company (cf. ib.).

However, if the given positive approach of hope, optimism and resilience is positively related to work-outcomes like job-satisfaction, work happiness and organizational commitment, how

can they be spread in the organization? How can this knowledge prevail in the enterprises and be established in the organizational culture? One way to realize this thinking in a sustainable way is the approach of positive deviance in workplace behavior.

In the following we try to define positive deviance and point out that this approach is not the only genuine one. Hence in this paper we will focus on this topic and discuss it below.

The positive deviance approach

Our first contact with the positive deviance approach was in the context of the social change projects of Sternin, Sternin and Singhal. The idea behind these projects can be summarized by the following steps. (a) Observation of a social group and their behaviors regarding a given problem. (b) Identification of positive deviant participants. These participants were able to cope with the given problem in a better way without the use of additional tools or contributions from outside the social group. (c) Extraction of easy-to-use methods for solving the identified problem by other members of the group. (d) Application of the easy-to-use methods by observational learning methods within the whole social group. Examples for this are the campaigns against malnutrition in Vietnam (Singhal, Arvind; Sternin, Jerry; Durá 2009) or for child protection in Uganda (Singhal, Arvind 2009). Yet the research into positive deviance goes back to the early 1900s.

This early research focused on the disvalued, moral, forbidden, and other social phenomena (White 1943, Goffman 1961). Later on the focus changed to a functional and social reaction approach learning from negative social behavior, change and control. In this deviant approaches the negative had a significant influence. The positive contribution of deviance emerged as late as in the 1990s. The literature of sociology differs between four approaches of positive deviance: *the normative, reactive, supra-conform, and statistical* perspective (Spreitzer & Sonenshein 2004).

The base of the *normative* positive deviance approach is focused on the nature of behavior and on norms. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) defined this perspective as an “intentional behavior that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways”. Another formulation of the positive deviance is the *reactive* approach. This perspective focuses on the deviant behavior and the connected reaction. But most of these theories are occupied with a negative impact as the reactive interest is a “*reductio ab absurdum*” (Goode 1991) (cf. Spreitzer/Sonenshein 2004).

The *supra-conformity* approach refers to a pro-normative concept. But the positive contribution could lead in this relation to dysfunction such as addiction. In contrast the

statistical deviance perspective is the most common one and refers to a different average behavior that statistically is not engaged with normal experiences or with the majority of a group. The hazard of this view is that the statistical deviance behavior could regard to all kinds of behavior that are classified as deviant (cf. Spreitzer/Sonenshein 2004).

All these definitions have a useful formulation but come with some limitations. But how can positive deviance be defined in a multicultural enterprise environment with reference to a positive workplace behavior?

Distribution of positive cultural workplace behavior

As already shown in the topic of diversity management, there are no appropriate tools to distribute and implement a positive cultural workplace behavior within the organization. Therefore we like to introduce two possible methods which can be applied in an organizational context: the methods of storytelling and Lego® serious play™.

Storytelling

One opportunity to spread the positive cultural workplace behavior in companies is the method of storytelling. Stories support the exchange of content, conceive context, encourage sustainability of learning, foster cognitive participation and influence the communication in a positive way (Frenzel 2006). Therefore they enable an approach to knowledge that is difficult to access and lead to a better understanding. According to that the empirical knowledge of the employees is recorded, evaluated and edited in terms of a story for all persons who are interested in (Thier 2004). Thus the stories are available for all staff members. Therefore if the method of storytelling is used, the approach of positive cultural workplace behavior could be implemented in the environment of companies. For instance, if a behavior of a manager or an employee who has been abroad as expatriate or gained experience with other cultures are narrated or written down as an experiential report it could be a positive example for other members in the company to act in the same way. This is an example for building relationships and sensitizing the members within the organization thus adapting the idea of cultural diversity management. Hence if the stories are prevailing the positive cultural workplace behavior can be implemented in the organization. One example for this is the critical incidents technique as explained by Flanagan (Flanagan 1954). Therefore big numbers of reactions on different occasions are observed and patterns of behavior extracted in combination with recommendations on possible behaviors. A big variety of critical incidents in intercultural settings was comprised by Alexander Thomas and colleagues when using, explaining and working with the concept of cultural standards.

Lego Serious Play™

Another option to distribute positive deviant behavior can be the method of Lego Serious Play™ (LSP™) which was developed and established by Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen in 1996. The target of this method is to combine the advantages of playing and modeling with real problem definitions (cf. LSP™ 2012): “(...) the idea was to invite participants to build symbolic or metaphorical representations in a non-judgmental, free thinking [...] and playful – kind of environment” (Gauntlett 2007). The basic idea of LSP™ is the usage of the complex interaction between the hands and neurons in the brain. In comparison with other connections in the body this sensory and motor link is particularly pronounced⁴. Hence from a psychological point of view the usage of LEGO benefits from the participants' open reaction to the game elements as well as from being more pre-dispositioned to learning and cognitive processes. The imaginations of “implementation with fingers” or of “object thinking” in the game release different thinking models, creative energy, and ways of perception. The process of figurative construction using the finger-hand-combination stimulates the brain in such a way that the underlying models are not only visualized, but rather become tangible through the construction in 3D (Kristiansen 2009). Yet how can the benefits of this method be used to spread the positive cultural workplace behavior? If the diverse group attends a LEGO workshop they can broach the issue of positive deviance or positive workplace behavior and explain their views with the help of LEGO-models. The advantage is that every single participant is heard and can point out their point of view, demonstrate their position within the model and explain it in a short story. Through this method a shared understanding is given, all aspects of all participants are spread and the topic of positive cultural workplace behavior is addressed. Thus, as pointed out in the arguments of creativity and problem solving (Vedder 2006), the wider variety of knowledge, meaning and understandings are combined and will have a positive effect on the success of the team and therefore the organization.

If these methods are implemented in an organizational context, a shared understanding of cultural diverse management is given and the occupation with cultural workplace behavior took place, we assume that the internal aspects of hope, optimism and resilience are indirectly addressed and the constructs such as core self-evaluation, job-satisfaction and positive reinforcement are positively influenced.

⁴ The depiction of the Homunculus in the field of neuro-anatomy is an example for the characteristics of the neural system (cf. Kristiansen et al. 2009).

Outlook

We gave a brief overview of possible links between the concepts of positive deviance, positive workplace behavior and cultural diversity management as well as methods to improve their effects on diverse teams. Due to the fact that these are theoretical thoughts no empirical evidence for the connections and linkages are given. This is seen as a lack of this paper and has to be verified in follow-up empirical work. Additionally it has to be mentioned that the positive deviance approach can only be used for change and impact on a social level. The methods cannot be used to improve the process change activities. There is no directly measurable impact on organizations by implementing these methods. Also highly sensibilised leaders and coaches are needed to actively improve the cultural diversity management.

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