

A New Look at Diversity - Dealing with differences as a natural component of systemic practice

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Diversity is essentially about dealing with social differences. Systemic work is the continuous work on and with differences – differences created by the observer. This will be illustrated by an international management development program.

In a recent lecture, Iris Koall phrased this as follows: diversity refers to the fact that "people are always both similar and different at the same time."¹ From a systemic point of view, one could specify this further: we as people are not similar and different - we perceive ourselves as similar and different. Making differentiations forms the basis of our perception. Only by differentiating can we actually gain insights: small only makes sense to us by differentiating it from big, inside by differentiating from outside, top by differentiating from bottom, and tomorrow by differentiating from today and yesterday. Differences are therefore always created by an observer; they are not "inherent" to the thing observed. Accordingly, the statement "Mr. Miller is unreliable" says very little about Mr. Miller. However, it says a lot about the perception, interpretation, and assessment of him by the person making this statement. We constantly construct differences which then guide our actions. The more observers make a certain distinction, the more it is reinforced, leading to a "reality" that is shared by many.

1. What distinctions do you make?

Systemic work as a trainer and consultant – and here it strongly overlaps with the managing diversity approach – means working with and on these differences. Working on which distinctions are made, or not made, and by whom in a certain context. Working on what is facilitated, reinforced, masked, or prevented by these differentiations. And, very importantly, working toward enabling the client in the course of this process to make new or different distinctions and offering new perspectives, explanations, and assessments of what is perceived. This, in turn, opens up new options for the client, provides new possibilities in terms of actions and solutions, and perhaps new decisions can be made.

But how do we recognize and broach differences that exist in concrete training or consulting situations (i.e. differences created by those involved)? How do we make them discussable and changeable? The following describes the experiences gained during a management development program at an

¹ Iris Koall, lecture. "Gender & Diversity: Communication and Culture"

international company and gives an impression of how diversity can be handled.

2. The management development program for Central and Eastern European countries at Robert Bosch AG Austria

As an international company, Robert Bosch GmbH, Stuttgart, strived to develop the markets very soon after the fall of the iron curtain and established sites in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE). With its regional location and history, Austria played and still plays an important role as a hub and enjoys a high degree of acceptance by the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Currently, Bosch is represented at 25 locations (both manufacturing and distribution) in the region. Of these, 12 distribution companies are overseen from Austria by Robert Bosch AG, Vienna. In its role as a hub and competence center for the development and support of the regional companies, Austria is not only active in the area of human resources management but also in IT and controlling. Special emphasis is placed on providing further training and support for the executives at the individual locations.

“Bosch is known for its innovative strength in technical areas and therefore has long been aware of the importance of the quality of its employees and executives. For this reason, consultants from osb were asked several years ago to carry out an executive program for us.” (Dr. Thomas, board member)

Because of the success of this program, the company’s top management in Austria, which is also responsible for the branch sales offices in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), decided to make the program available for the executives in these countries as well. The following are some of the goals the company pursued with this program:

- supporting executives in Central and Eastern Europe in their increasingly complex and demanding managerial activities,
- the opportunity to actively look into the latest leadership approaches, to check their suitability, and to adapt them to the particular situation and culture,
- establishing a basis for interlinking the participants from the different countries.

In keeping with our approach to learning and the selected learning architecture, this was to be accomplished by:

- incorporating the different stakeholders into the learning process. This “investment in learning” can only become firmly anchored within the organization if superiors and employers identify with and support the participants as well as learn with them. Otherwise, learning ends with the individual employees.
- closely linking training topics with the organization’s strategic issues. This allows the learned practices to achieve the desired effect within the organization. By closely interweaving the daily management routines with the learning process, concrete leadership situations experienced by the participants are dealt with in the seminars and alternatives are considered and simulated. They are then subjected to “the practical test” in the actual “learning phases” between the modules. In the next module, these experiences are reported, evaluated, and further adapted.

- handling the different cultures, histories, and languages in a respectful, appreciative, and subtle manner without emphasizing these differences too much. The focus here was not on “having to change oneself” but instead on the “expansion of one’s repertoire.”

So much for the noble goals. But how does one concretely implement these goals in a case like this where 20 participants from 12 countries, who hardly knew each other or didn’t know each other at all, met during the first of what are now three completed phases? Moreover, the participants did not know exactly what to expect and were confronted with a learning approach that most of them were completely unaccustomed to. In addition, they were greatly restricted in their options for expressing themselves since they had to communicate with one another in German, the company language. These factors alone created an initial situation that was anything but simple. However, innumerable other differences were encountered in addition to the various countries of origin and native languages, for example different hierarchical levels, different functions, different educational backgrounds, different age and gender, and in part a very different length of employment with the company. All in all, an enormous diversity and complexity. All these differences – and many more – were present in one room, but not all carried the same relevance with regard to the goal of mutual learning. The program’s main focus was on promoting the participants’ leadership skills, not on dealing with the topic of “intercultural work,” even if this always resonated in the background due to the composition of the group.

3. The focus is on the task, not on diversity

To date, the course has included several modules created by us on the subject areas of leadership and management, shaping difficult communication situations, dealing with conflicts, as well as teamwork and team management. It was supplemented by other colleagues’ seminars such as time management, professional presentation, the performance review, and grid management. The entire program took place over the course of a year and was framed by a kickoff, a closing workshop for evaluating what was learned (in terms of one’s own role, the learning team, and view of the organization), and a closing presentation including all participants, the management board, and the respective regional directors.

The work focused on dealing with new management models, reflecting on one’s own leadership practices and leadership behavior, one’s own role and own leadership pattern, dealing with current and future leadership challenges, as well as testing useful management tools on the basis of concrete situations from the daily management routine, for example the discussing of conflicts or conflict facilitation in teams.

In each phase of the course, the participants formed groups heterogeneously compiled according to criteria such as different countries of origin, functions, age, sex, etc. Without losing sight of these differences, the groups had to work on certain questions and tackle certain tasks in each module. This means that, although the existing dissimilarities were briefly brought to the participants’ minds from time to time, the focus was immediately directed back to their joint work on the topic of management. The participants had to find a mutual basis for working with and being mindful of these differences in order to be able to successfully tackle their tasks.

4. Well-intentioned – the opposite of good

One of our central hypotheses in this connection is, if the topic of cultural differences is specifically and actively addressed and emphasized by the trainers in such a setting, this generally results in one of two typical reactions. Either the participants dismiss the difference as not relevant or this emotionally charged topic “pops” open, bringing all of the usual preconceptions, clichés, prejudices, and all associated emotions and conflicts out in the open (Romanians are..., You can't...with Russians). The consequence is that an enormous expenditure of time and energy is needed to “rope” the topic in again, and still, it almost inevitably dominates all further work. Instead of the anticipated, more differentiated view regarding the differences exposed and the subsequent dissolving and resolving of clichés, this will more likely result in a confirmation of the previously existing classifications – the exact opposite of what had been intended.

This leads us to thesis 2: if one draws the participants' attention to the shared topic, in this case “leadership,” and confronts the group with a concrete task that requires the resources of all group members in order to be accomplished, and, if necessary, carefully points out that existing differences of group members could prove to be helpful and useful resources for this task, the participants often begin on their own to discover “surprising” similarities and differences and to question previously rigid images.

Gardenswartz & Rowe express the following thesis regarding the great challenges that arise for us when dealing with diversity: “The human species resists change, continuing to seek homeostasis. This makes the constant adaptation required by diversity difficult for people already overwhelmed by staggering transitions.” In addition, “human beings find comfort and trust in likeness. There is a tendency to seek the company of those most similar to us.”

Applied to the international management program, one could say: in the beginning, the enormous diversity and complexity seems threatening, it is terrifying. People don't know one another, can't express themselves the way they are used to, and feel crushed by the thought of somehow having to deal with this diversity. A sense of security can be gained in this situation by focusing on similarities such as the mutual topic, the mutual goal, the mutual organization to which one belongs, and the tasks to be accomplished jointly. The more these mutual and therefore security-giving factors are emphasized, the greater the willingness of the participants to also look at the other side – the existing or assumed differences – and to deal with these differences in an appropriate manner. People start to become aware of their own assumptions, to question them (“He is not at all how I thought he was.”), and to occasionally put them into perspective or change them.

5. Learning by experience

It is therefore our opinion that, in a curriculum like this, it makes a big difference whether emotionally charged topics such as cultural differences are addressed in the first module already or not until the fourth. However, as touched upon above, the general question still remains as to if it isn't actually counterproductive if such topics are brought up by the trainer because this could put participants on the defensive and, as a result, existing images would more likely be reinforced than dissolved. Of course,

the topic of conflict behavior can, for example, also be dealt with by forming groups according to “similar national cultures” but also and at least just as well – as in our case – by forming groups according to the criterion of “(presumed) similarity of the business units.”

In the case at hand, this coincidentally resulted in a coming together of Romanian and Bulgarian participants who thus far had hardly had contact with one another. In the course of their work, they discovered with astonishment that their superior regional director and her way of dealing with conflicts had apparently been such a formative influence that, from the participants’ point of view, the particular national cultures faded into the background. During the subsequent discussion of the exercise, they described their own perceptions of the cultures for the first time: “Romanians tend to be extroverted and curious, Bulgarians are more reserved – but interestingly the corporate culture in both units is very similar.” Discussing the top manager’s conduct and impact made it possible for them to observe differences – similarities to be exact – and, using these similarities, to examine previously made differentiations on the basis of the experiences they had just made.

If, to name another example from the course, a Croat, a Serb, a Slovak, a Russian, and a Romanian suddenly find themselves gathered in a group that is given the task of preparing a joint presentation for the management board by the next morning and they master this task superbly, then a learning experience has implicitly taken place (“Who among us would have thought in the beginning that we could get along so well and complement and support each other so well?”). Had the group members’ attention been drawn specifically to it, this learning experience would hardly have been possible.

/ decide the differences.

One could say that learning takes place on the meta-level as a result of the selected seminar design. Depending on how I differentiate, which distinctions I make, which perspective I take (first from the viewpoint of similar business units, then from the viewpoint of certain functions, a third time from the viewpoint of different lengths of leadership experience, and so forth), I make a different observation each time, find other similarities and differences, discover various new aspects every time, and again and again find that previous standpoints are put into perspective. Once this step of experimenting with points of view, the relativization of one’s own interpretation, has taken place, the participants recognize the various cultural differences only as an additional possibility for differentiation which they as an “observer” can carry out – an additional “pair of glasses,” an additional filter through which certain things are brought into focus and others are faded out. According to our thesis, this increases the probability of truly accepting differences of this kind as a resource, of appreciating them, and subsequently being able to deal productively with these differences. Only now that this foundation has been laid can diverse preconceptions and expectations, which create tensions and conflicts, be clearly articulated and thus become verifiable and negotiable. If, on the other hand, this learning experience is absent, often nothing beyond pleas for attitude changes and a definition of desirable behavior are accomplished. In terms of dealing with diversity, this means that each battle to change classifications – be it with the best of intentions – in fact only confirms them.