Why aren’t more human resource leaders champions of diversity?

T he last few years have witnessed significant global groundswells of social activism over the last few years have highlighted the issue of diversity. There is now increasing pressure on organisations to address diversity, especially among leadership. Within such organisations, managing this process usually falls within the ambit of the human resource leader, so their sensitivity to issues of culture and diversity is key. Dr Lauren Turner and Dr Kimberly Merriman, senior researchers in organisational behaviour at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA, have studied to what degree their work has provoked some uncomfortable questions.

Significant global groundswells of social activism over the last few years have increased attention to issues of diversity and the necessity to speak openly about racism and sexism. The fact that they were popular and highly visible movements gave them significant impetus and powered a sense of urgency to address their concerns. They also gave energy to the concept of diversity and a term for those decision-makers unprepared to embrace it: tone deaf.

In any organisation, the person usually charged with decisions around diversity is the human resources manager; now finding a seat in the C-suite of corporate organisations as the CHRO - or chief human resources officer. CHRO is a generic title referring to an organisation’s most senior officer responsible for overseeing the human resource management function. If they are to champion diversity, we need a way to measure their sensitivity to the issues and their influence within an organisation.

This was the idea behind a study by two senior researchers at the University of Massachusetts Lowell in the United States. Dr Lauren A Turner is Senior Vice President of Talent and Inclusion at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Massachusetts, and adjunct faculty in the UMass Lowell Manning School of Business, and Dr Kimberly Merriman is Professor of Management at UMass Lowell Manning School of Business. Together, they wanted to test the hypothesis that there was a positive relationship between a CHRO’s awareness of, and sensitivity towards, diversity, priorities and diversity management practices (DMPs) in an organisation.

Furthermore, they were interested in the influence of CHROs within the top management team entrusted with steering an organisation’s overall ethos and direction. Their research exposed some sobering realities of diversity priorities.

THE ISSUE OF CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

At the heart of Turner and Merriman’s study was a growing concept within business management, psychology, and academic research: cultural intelligence, sometimes referred to as cultural quotient, or CQ. The term emerged in 2003 from the work of two researchers in organisational behaviour, Christopher Earley and Soon Ang. Unlike IQ, which a score can quantify and, more recently, EQ (emotional quotient), CQ is still finding its form. In essence, a person’s CQ reflects a broad set of capabilities that facilitates their effectiveness across different cultural environments. It usually exists as a scale framed by four capabilities: metacognition (a person’s self-awareness of their assumptions about, and bias towards, other cultures), cognitions (their knowledge and understanding of different cultures), motivation (their interest in experiencing other cultures), and behaviour (their ability to apply that cultural knowledge).

Much of the research into cultural intelligence first centred around cultural diversity between persons of different nationalities within a working environment. Researchers have since broadened the scope of cultural diversity to include the various social identity groupings typical of organisations. This diversity could range from evident differences between national cultures to the subtle nuances of sub-cultures within nationally homogenous groupings, such as engineering and marketing teams within an organisation.

What interested Turner and Merriman was diversity expressed in women, persons of colour, and people who identified as LGBTQ+ on the staff and faculty at higher education institutions. Turner and Merriman’s choice of higher education institutions makes sense: such institutions usually have a similar management structure to other large organisations, including boards and executive teams steering strategy: Also, universities are supposedly environments of enlightened moral codes towards diversity, and therefore should embrace diversity management practices.

TAPPING SENSITIVE DATA

Turner and Merriman sent an electronic survey to the CHROs representing 2,777 colleges and universities across the US. They ultimately attained 193 completed surveys, a response rate of 7% from the top management team when needed. Turner and Merriman’s choice of higher education institutions makes sense: such institutions usually have a similar management structure to other large organisations, including boards and executive teams steering strategy: Also, universities are supposedly environments of enlightened moral codes towards diversity, and therefore should embrace diversity management practices.

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diversity management practices were established at each institution. These included practices that establish responsibility for and oversight of diversity management, such as committees overseeing diversity initiatives; those that reduce bias in organisational decision-making, such as training programmes on diversity management for senior leaders; and practices that reduce social isolation, such as mentoring and networking programmes. Significantly, these practices go beyond legal requirements and therefore hold some degree of discretion for organisations. Of these, the researchers were particularly interested in practices established during the CHRO’s tenure.

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE CHRO?
The outcomes of Turner and Merriman’s study confirmed both of their predictions. Focusing on the impact of the CHRO’s cultural intelligence by controlling for other potential influences – such as diversity management practices in place before their tenure versus those created during it, their years in tenure and therefore time to potentially engage their potential transformational influence, and their annual operating budgets – it was evident that a CHRO’s cultural intelligence accounted for significant variance in established diversity management practices across the sample organisations. CHRO cultural intelligence was a meaningful differentiator of diversity management practices within an industry already known for its attention to diversity.

The findings showed that influence mattered, too, based on the premise that culturally intelligent CHROs translate their intentions into actual outcomes through transformative persuasion of other senior leaders. Members of top management teams often have distinct priorities that may have little common ground with diversity efforts. The same inherent abilities that underlie cultural intelligence also seem aligned with a particularly effective form of transformative leadership behaviours that CHROs employ when influence is needed. These behaviours include providing an inspirational vision to others, serving as an ideal role model, coaching instead of demanding, and figuratively meeting people where they are at.

Like any research, Turner and Merriman’s study is a small piece in a very big and complicated puzzle about human behaviour in social settings. The researchers are well aware of its limitations. It only examines one sector – higher education – and as a cross-sectional study, it is a snapshot in time and therefore unable to unearth clear lines of causality. However, it does have broad implications: it underlines the importance of cultural intelligence in an organisation’s CHRO if critical diversity management practices are to take hold and produce socially healthier and more representative organisations. Therefore, it suggests cultural intelligence be an essential qualification for CHRO recruitment. It also points to the importance of cultural intelligence within the entire top management team beyond just the CHRO in order to supplant the need to ‘sell’ diversity practices at the top.

The study also prompts some uncomfortable questions at a time when issues of diversity are still so sensitive yet critical to social discourse: why do almost three quarters of the CHROs lack formal membership on their institution’s senior leadership team and why do only one quarter of the institutions provide training in diversity management for their board? And, if college and university campuses as bastions of diversity and human rights seem somewhat reluctant to elevate diversity management to the highest levels of leadership on their own campuses, what hope is there for diversity management beyond their hallowed halls?

Behind the Research

Dr Lauren A Turner
Senior Vice President of Talent and Inclusion at UMass Lowell prior to joining WPI. She holds a PhD in leadership and organisational studies, UMass Lowell.

Dr Kimberly Merriman
Professor of Management at UMass Lowell, Manning School of Business, and a widely published scholar and recognised authority on workforce issues, human capital, and real estate trends pertaining to the workforce.

Research Objectives

The team’s research shows the importance of cultural intelligence in effective human resource management (HRM).

Details

Bio
Dr Lauren A Turner is Senior Vice President of Talent and Inclusion at UMass Lowell, and adjunct faculty in the UMass Lowell Manning School of Business. She has served in top leadership positions in HRM in higher education for over 30 years and was known for its attention to diversity.

Dr Kimberly Merriman is Professor of Management at UMass Lowell, Manning School of Business.

References


Personal Response

How are you planning to advance your research?

Our next study, currently underway, examines unique qualitative data from an organisational task force set up to address sexual harassment and equity during the 1980s. We are again dissecting how diversity practices become established and will extrapolate implications for today. Surprisingly, many of the diversity issues from 30 years ago still very much exist today.

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