

Can Diversity Initiatives Be Exported?

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The manager across the table from us had recently returned to the United States after working for a Japanese company for seven years. Concern clouded his features as he spoke. “I was very disturbed by what I saw happening to Japanese women. Many were highly productive. Some even had MBAs. Yet they were typing, filing, answering phones and serving tea.”

It doesn't make sense, he was saying, to let people with skills, experience and energy go to waste because you don't hire, develop, promote or empower them. That realization provides the foundation for diversity initiatives – efforts to ensure people from all across the demographic spectrum a full opportunity to contribute as much as they possibly can to their company's growth and improvement of its products and services.

Companies harvesting the benefits of diversity here in the United States naturally consider exporting diversity initiatives to their operations abroad. But it is risky to assume that human resource policies and practices working well in the United States will also work well overseas. If the manager quoted above had seen women's talents unused in an American office, he could have exercised his decision-making power to bring about change, confident that his efforts would enjoy wide (if not unanimous) acceptance and eventual success because the values motivating him would be very largely shared by the women, their colleagues, friends, families and, most important, influential segments of the American public. This is not necessarily the case abroad, where other widely honored sets of values lead people to have different perspectives.

“One woman in my department was especially bright and able,” continued the manager. “I decided to see if I could get her promoted. I spoke to a Japanese senior executive about this idea. He definitely was not enthusiastic about a promotion for this or any other woman! Late one evening he revealed the reason for his opinion: In Japan, men do not report to women.”

This Japanese executive provides a fine example of someone who is quite comfortable assuming that people's birth-given or “ascribed” traits (in this case, gender) are a proper basis for assigning an economic role and social status. Although Americans believe it's critically important to evaluate people on the basis of their achievements, rather than their ascribed traits (gender, ethnicity, age, national origin, and so forth), people abroad are not as enamored of achievement as we are. In Germany and the U.K., achievement and ascription are both

involved in people's evaluation of each other. In Mexico and Japan, ascription is far more significant than achievement in determining one's role and status. The Japanese executive's attitude toward women did not take achievement or potential into account. Does this mean the diversity-minded American manager should have given up? Fortunately, he did not. His experience is instructive.

"I met with the managers of the group to which the woman belonged," he reported, "and easily got them to agree that she was the most productive person, male or female, in their group. After several rounds of discussion, they all reached consensus that she should be promoted-but only to assistant manager. Upon hearing the news, the woman herself was astounded and embarrassed. She dreaded being singled out as the only woman to be promoted. She begged me not to publicly announce the promotion at the regular Monday morning staff meeting. I agreed. Her promotion was later listed in the staff newsletter, and drew contradictory reactions from the other women in the office. Some complained to me that they had no one to go to bat for them as I had done for the woman who was promoted. But others expressed dread that I or someone else might actually try to develop their careers."

The female employees themselves were divided about this diversity-inspired step of promotion on the basis of achievement. The ones who were opposed were not older workers, mired in tradition; they were modern young women who, from our American perspective, would directly benefit from such promotion policies. But achievement as a way of deciding who does what is not widely embraced in Japan – which is one reason why those who would introduce made-in-America diversity initiatives there might be courting disappointment.

Although the American manager's victory for diversity is hardly worth mentioning by our standards, it is quite significant by Japanese standards. Understanding how he gained this victory is important. First, he knew the local culture well and recognized the limits of its tolerance for rapid social change. Second, he chose a very modest objective (a small promotion for one woman). Finally, he used local methods (consensus building) in trying to encourage his local colleagues to accept change. This manager took a cautious, thoughtful approach to decisions about introducing diversity-related practices abroad – an approach other American companies looking to export not only their goods and services, but also their diversity initiatives, would do well to adopt.