**DIVERSITY CHALLENGES AT EASTERN UNIVERSITY**

**TEACHING NOTE**

This teaching note was prepared by the authors and is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion. The views presented here are those of the authors based on their professional judgment and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Society for Case Research. The names of individuals, the firm, and its location have been disguised to preserve anonymity. Copyright 2013 by the Society for Case Research and the authors. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means without the written permission of the Society for Case Research.

**Critical Incident Overview**

Ram Thackery, an international student who was a graduating senior at Eastern University overheard the Vice President for Student Affairs make what he perceived to be an insensitive and offensive comment regarding minorities. Ram was the President of the Student Senate and was actively involved as a campus leader in promoting diversity issues. The Vice President’s comment regarding minorities causes the student to reexamine his own diversity efforts at Eastern University. The underlying theme in this incident is that the student feels that the university has not prepared for increased diversity on campus. Further, despite his many efforts as the Student Senate President to highlight diversity issues, not much progress seems to have been made. As Ram gets ready to graduate, he developed a plan to make his feelings known to university officials in a very dramatic way. Ram shared his plan with his professor, and asked for her help in his culture change effors. Dr. Audrey Lewis, who is African American and teaches a course on Global Diversity, has served as his friend and teacher now and in the past.

**Research Methods**

This critical incident was written based on discussions between the student who experienced the situation and the professor who served as his adviser and mentor. Secondary sources such as the university website and other published documents were used. The names of the individuals, the university, and its location have been disguised to preserve anonymity.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The learning objectives for this critical incident are for students to:

1. Compare and contrast individual perceptions, values and attitudes about diversity.
2. Analyze and explain how an understanding of culture can enhance organizational diversity efforts at Eastern University.
3. Develop a strategy for Ram Thackery to initiate a diversity management process at Eastern University.

Courses this incident may be applied to:

This descriptive critical incident may be applied to undergraduate classes in Organizational Behavior, Diversity, Human Resource Management, Business Ethics, American Studies and Cultural Pluralism. It is also applicable to other courses which contain a module on diversity issues.

**Questions**

After reading the critical incident, and before focusing on the questions below, the instructor can increase student involvement by asking them to decide if Eastern University is doing all that it can to create a supportive and inclusive environment for international and domestic minority students. The instructor can poll the students and ask for a show of hands in response to the two questions below:

1. How many students feel that Eastern University has an inclusive culture for diverse students?
2. How many students feel that Ram over reacted with regard to Dr. Chambers’ comment to the trustees?
3. Does the incident provide sufficient information to come to reasonable conclusions about the issues raised above?
4. Eastern University is undergoing a change in the diversity composition of its current and future student body. What should Eastern do to assure that it has a culture which supports an increasingly diverse student population? (LO1 and LO2)
5. Explain why Ram saw Dr. Chambers’ comment as offensive, while Dr. Chambers saw his comment as funny. (LO1)
6. Suppose that you are Ram Thackery, an international student at Eastern University. You feel that the culture of the university does not support a more diverse student population. Compose a letter to the University’s Board of Trustees which will bring this matter to their attention and create a need for action on their part. (LO3)
7. Should Dr. Lewis get involved? If yes, what will her involvement contribute to the change process? (LO1 and LO2)

**Answers to Questions**

1. Eastern University is undergoing a change in the diversity composition of its current and future student body. What should Eastern University do to assure that it has a culture which supports a more diverse student population?

While a comprehensive review of culture is beyond the scope of this situation, it is necessary to discuss culture with an eye toward organizational effectiveness. To really understand the impact of culture on the success or failure of an organization’s diversity efforts one must first have a broad understanding of what culture is. An anthropological definition of culture is:

“Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values.” (Kluckhohn, 1951, pp. 86).

Therefore, at its most basic level culture is:

* Something that is shared by all or almost all members of some social group such as a nation, region, an organization, a profession, an age group or a religious group.
* A system of values and beliefs, symbols, heroes, rituals, and practices.
* Something that is transmitted from one generation to another.
* Something that human beings get socialized into from “day one.”

Bringing diverse members into an organization is rarely a seamless or easy process with uncertain results. Even skilled organizational leaders can fail to anticipate the problems that managing diversity can present. However, organization leaders can help mitigate the problems associated with managing diversity by understand the organization’s culture and implementing actions that make the organization more inclusive. First, we need to understand that culture is pervasive. All members of the organization feel it even if they cannot describe it. Some parts of culture like similar manners, actions, dress codes, actions rituals and ceremonies are clearly visible. Other parts of culture like deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and values are invisible. In fact, they are sometimes so deeply held that we do not know they exist. These aspects of culture seem so natural that organization members don’t think about them. Rather they regard these actions as natural, the way things are done around here.

The impact of the invisible characteristics of the Eastern University culture eventually became problematic for Ram Thackery. Ram felt that the organizations insensitivity to the international students’ issue with the residence halls closing for short breaks, the isolation that some international and minority students feel and the sometimes derogatory comments made about minority students became part of Eastern University’s culture. While these issues were not problems for the majority of Eastern University’s student population, they were very problematic for those outside of the dominant culture. The fact that the university’s administration did little to address these issues only reinforced Ram’s perception that more could be done. Therefore, lack of attention to the organization’s existing culture can hamper diversity efforts.

Since culture is something that is shared by most members of the organization, University leaders need to communicate a common definition of diversity which will apply to all diversity efforts at Eastern University. Diversity often means different things to different people and, as a result, therefore, a common definition of diversity will help assure that all diversity management efforts are working towards the same goal. There are many factors that can be included in a definition of diversity. However, it is important to remind students that the definition of diversity is expansive, but not unbounded. Too narrow a definition supports the assumption that diversity is limited to gender and race. Unbounded definitions that stress the idea that we are all different on some level include an emphasis on personal characteristics like hair and eye color, height, and organizational factors like differences in work location and division and departmental differences tend to over reach and make diversity definitions less meaningful (Canas & Sondak, 2008). Therefore, any definition of diversity should be constructed to note that there is a fundamental difference between characteristics that make a person a unique human being and those that influence an individual’s treatment and opportunity based on their group membership. Below are two definitions of diversity which can be used in the analysis of this situation and extended to discussions of workforce diversity.

According to Taylor Cox (2001) diversity can be defined as “the variation of social and cultural identities among people existing together in a defined employment or market setting.” Cox further explains that social and cultural identities are personal affiliations such as gender race, national origin, religion, age, and work specializations that have “significant influence on people’s major life experiences.” Cox further states that organizations may be able to promote and enhance the diversity of their own organizations by using diversity management programs.

R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr. (1996) simply defines diversity as “any mixture of items characterized by differences and similarities.” He also states that diversity can be managed by creating a climate in which each individual member regardless of race or gender can fully develop and thrive in an institution.

Therefore, Eastern University faces the challenge of instituting a culture that supports its strategic goal of creating a more diverse student population. Kotter’s (2007) Eight Steps for Leading Organizational Change should be taken by university leaders to guide their efforts. Kotter’s model includes the following steps: 1) establish a sense of urgency, 2) create the guiding coalition, 3) develop a vision and strategy, 4) communicate the change vision, 5) empower broad-based action, 6) generate short-term wins, 7) consolidate gains and produce more change, and 8) anchor new approaches in the culture.

The following steps, establish a sense of urgency, create the guiding coalition and develop a vision and strategy, are particularly applicable to Eastern University. These steps are discussed in greater detail below.

**Establish a sense of urgency.** Kotter states that the biggest mistake people make when trying to undertake a change effort is to plunge ahead without establishing a high enough sense of urgency in managers and employees. This error is fatal because transformations fail to achieve their objectives when complacency is high. In Ram’s case, he had made repeated attempts to establish this sense of urgency by meeting with several members of Administration at Eastern University. However, there repeated attempts did not produce the desired outcome and Ram felt that he had to take a bold action to create a culture that saw diversity as a high priority. Therefore, Ram did attempt to create a sense of urgency by writing a letter to members of Eastern University’s Board of Trustees.

**Create the guiding coalition**. Major organization is often seen as impossible without the support of top organization leaders (Kotter, 2012). While the guiding coalition includes top management, it goes far beyond that. The guiding coalition should include representatives from all levels of the organization. The coalition at Eastern University should include members of the faculty, top administration, students, and other members of the campus community with an interest in diversity management. Therefore, Ram should broaden his efforts to include other members of the community. One can assume that Ram is attempting to do this by discussing his efforts with Dr. Lewis. As President of the Student Senate, Ram had the perfect opportunity to include students in his diversity efforts. The incident does not provide enough information to determine if Ram did include students and other community members in his efforts, but it is very important to make this change effort an inclusive process.

**Develop a vision and strategy**. Kotter (2012) states that vision plays a key role in producing change by directing, aligning and inspiring actions on the part of people. Further, he states that without a vision , transformation efforts can dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects that go in the wrong direction or no direction at all. Ram needs to convey a vision for diversity in all of his change attempts. While the vision may be further defined and clarified as the University buys into a diversity management endeavor, a clearly stated vision will assure that all parties are on the same page and have a common understanding of where the change efforts should lead.

1. Explain why Ram saw Dr. Chambers’ comment as offensive, while Dr. Chambers saw the comment as funny.

To understand why Ram Thackery and Dr. Chambers viewed the same statement differently, one needs to understand the role of perception in understanding the world around us. Simply defined, perception is a cognitive process that enables us to interpret and understand our surroundings. It involves determining what information to notice, how to categorize it, and how to interpret the information within the framework of our existing knowledge.

Therefore, perception is the mental process we use to understand our environment. Social or personal perception is the process of using cues from our environment to understand people, ourselves and others. While perceiving the physical environment can be relatively objective, perceptions about people can be subjective and open to interpretation (McShane, 2010).

Perceptions vary from person to person because of the mental models individuals hold. Mental models serve as road maps for making sense of objects, events, and people. These road maps are based on each person’s individual life experiences and cause people to see events from their own unique perspective. As a result, a lawyer may see events from a legal perspective while a social worker may see things from a behavioral perspective (Kreitner & Kincki, 2010).

Similarly, Clawson (2009) states that leadership is about change and if you are not changing, you are not leading. He proposes a three-level model of leadership which demonstrates how anyone in an organization has the potential to become a leader. Level one, the most basic of levels consists of visible behaviors. These behaviors consist of everything that a person says or does.

Level two consists of conscious thoughts. Here, leaders take into account the thoughts that people are aware of, whether they choose to communicate them or not. Leadership at this level shows more respect for others and allows the leader to better understand the followers.

Level three leadership focuses on values, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (VABEs). VABE are unique to each person and makes the individual who he or she is. VABEs are influenced by family, culture, personality and life experiences. VABEs are deeply held and influence our daily behaviors.

In the case of Ram and Dr. Chambers, each person makes meaning of the comment from his own unique perspective and individual VABEs. Ram likely sees the comment as offensive because he is interpreting it from the perspective of an international student. He perceives the culture of Eastern as needing to be more supportive of diverse, non-dominant culture students. He feels that the university has devoted little action to solving the issues these students face in their daily lives at Eastern University. Therefore, when he hears Dr. Chambers’ comment it reinforces his perception that the culture needs to improve its diversity management efforts. On the other hand, Dr. Chambers may see the comment as benign, somewhat amusing that serves as an ice breaker for the influential trustees. While we do not know the particular life experiences that form Dr. Chambers’ mental models, it is quite likely that they are very different from those of Ram. This difference in the way each person has experienced life events do date can account for the difference in their reactions to the same comment.

1. Suppose that you are Ram Thackery, an international student at Eastern University. You feel that the culture of the university does not support a more diverse student population. Compose a letter to the University’s Board of Trustees which will bring the matter to their attention and create a need for action on their part.

Student answers will vary. Students should be directed to compose a letter that will 1) state the problem, 2) discuss the need for change, and 3) offer suggestions on how to undertake a culture change process that will support a more diverse student population at Eastern University.

Following the student letters, students should compare their letters to the actual letter written by Ram Thackery which is included in Appendix A to discuss and analyze the effectiveness of each letter.

1. Should Dr. Lewis get involved? If yes, what will her involvement contribute to the change process? (LO1 and LO2)

Student answers will vary. Some will argue that she is already involved just by serving as confidant and mentor to Ram. The issue becomes does she choose to carry her involvement to a higher level or does she choose to end her involvement at this level. If she chooses to advance her involvement, she could advise Ram about diversity management since she teaches a course in Global Diversity. She could also assist Ram in developing a coalition of other faculty to aid in his diversity efforts. Finally, Dr. Lewis could help Ram prepare an initial vision to present to university leaders. It is likely that her personal values and attitudes toward diversity and diversity management will guide her behavior. Values are stable, evaluative beliefs that guide our preferences for courses of action. They are perceptions of what is good or bad, right or wrong. They tell us what we ought to do. The incident tells us that Dr. Lewis is African American. As a result, students may assume that her value aligns very closely with Ram’s values since they are both outside of the dominant culture. Students should be cautioned against making broad assumptions that all diverse people think and feel the same way. This line of thought can lead to incorrect assumptions and faulty thinking.

Here, it is important to stress the fact that all diverse people do not see life in the same way. Since the incident does not tell the reader anything about Dr. Lewis’ background and life experience, any opinion offered by the student would be based on their own perceptions, values, and attitudes. Dr. Lewis’ unique set of VABEs (Clawson, 2008) will guide her decision as to whether or not she will become more involved in Ram’s change plan.

At this point, the instructor could begin a discussion about perceptual errors, stereotyping and projection. Students can be asked if the instructor’s race, gender, age and job title and role influenced their answers. Students should be made aware of the danger of falling into the perceptual errors of stereotyping and projection.

**Additional Pedagogical Materials**

This incident lends itself to experiential learning. One activity is to have the students work through the change process at Eastern University using Schein’s levels of culture to identify the culture of Eastern University (Schein, 1980).

Schein’s model identifies the levels of culture as:

1. Surface Level Artifacts (visible) which include organizational structures, processes, rituals, physical layout, etc.
2. Values (espoused and operational) which in the case of espoused values are what the organization says it values in terms of its philosophies and the operational values, what the organization actually does.
3. Basic Underlying Assumptions which are the values and behavior of the organization. Assumptions are often difficult to identify and change.

While the incident does not identify all of the levels explicitly, students can use their knowledge of higher education to fill in the areas not specifically mentioned in the critical incident. For example, all universities have classrooms, libraries, dining halls, etc. Students can expand on these artifacts. Further, they may be able to identify the values and assumptions by paying attention to the interactions of students and the supports that are already in place. Here, students may observe whether or not all of the minority or international students sit together in the dining halls, do dominant culture students attend social events planned and conducted by the diverse students on campus. This will require some assumptions on the students’ part, but it will provide good practice in having students identify the culture of an organization.

Following the identification of the university’s culture, the students should use an Organizational Development (OD) process to implement a “planned organizational change” which would help the organization’s ability to improve itself and a humane and effective organization. (See Appendix B for a review of several OD processes). Prior to undertaking this step they should further research OD change techniques to decide which one they would use to change Eastern University’s culture. Finally, each group reports to the class about the OD process used, how they identified Eastern University’s culture, what decisions were taken, and the factors which could affect the success of their change effort.

In a 50 minute class period, this entire process should take two class periods of time with the first class period used to read the incident and review OD processes. Students can then begin to work through the cultural identification issues if time permits. Students should meet outside of class to complete the OD intervention and the second class period should be used for student presentations, feedback and evaluation.

**Epilogue**

The student described in this incident received an angry telephone call from the Executive Assistant to the President of Eastern University early Monday morning following commencement requesting that they meet. Since Ram had already graduated and knew that no discipline, reprimand or other action could be taken against him he declined to meet with the President’s assistant.

When he met with Dr. Lewis later that morning, he told her of his decision not to meet with the President’s Assistant, but vowed to continue working on diversity management efforts at Eastern University after graduation. He explained that he was planning to attend graduate school in the area in the fall and would take his cause directly to the students.

Dr. Lewis was disappointed in Ram’s decision not to work through the existing chain of command since effective change efforts must have the support of top management. As a result, Dr. Lewis decided to take no action in support of Ram’s activities, but decided to speak on behalf of diverse students at the Eastern University diversity council meetings and in private meetings at the departmental level.

**APPENDIX A**: Ram’s Letter to Eastern University’s Board of Trustees

To The Board of Trustees, Eastern University:

My name is Ram Thackery and I am an international student at Eastern University. I have been an active member of the Eastern University community during the past four years. I served as the Student Senate President for the past two years and have been deeply involved in several other organizations here at Eastern. I have developed a close relationship with faculty, staff and fellow students. I have grown as an individual during my time here at Eastern and I consider the faculty and staff to be extended family.

As an international student, I have had several experiences related to culture on campus. Most significantly, I worked with the Intercultural Center to form the Student Cultural Council. The Student Cultural Council consists of faculty, staff and students. The goal of the Cultural Council is to make Eastern a more welcoming place for international students. I have met regularly with President Hedly and Vice President Chambers and other top administrators to discuss the council’s suggestions on how to prepare Eastern for the proposed increase in international and minority students. They have been very supportive through the entire process and agree with most of our suggestions. However, despite extensive dialogue and what I sincerely believe to be good intentions, there seems to be a clear gap between discussion and implementation.

I am writing this letter to express my reservations regarding Eastern’s preparation for the proposed increase in diverse students. I truly care for the well-being of my fellow students and feel compelled to express my concerns as an outgoing Eastern graduate. I want this letter to result in a positive outcome for both the students and the University. As an international student at Eastern, I would like to state that the Eastern campus is unprepared for the proposed increase in diversity of the student body. In order to effectively recruit and retain diverse students, we need to understand some of the constraints and challenges they face at Eastern.

The goal of increasing diversity at Eastern is an organizational strategy. It is the responsibility of the entire community to create a welcoming atmosphere for these students. It is not the sole responsibility of the Multicultural Center to retain them. We cannot assign one department the task of achieving an organizational strategy. The successful achievement of this goal requires coordinated planning and implementation by all divisions of the institution.

While there is much work to be done to achieve this goal, an important starting point would be to provide for the students’ basic needs. Most of our international students come from India or China. They cannot go home for short breaks such as Thanksgiving and Spring Break. There students have to stay in local hotels at great expense. This is an issue that has been raised for a number of years. Yet, the issue remains unresolved by the EU Administration.

Additional steps are needed to create a more welcoming environment, such as increasing the scope of the ESL (English as a Second Language) program, diversity training for faculty and staff, and more open dialogue about creating an inclusive community that supports the diverse body of students. However, addressing students ‘basic needs is an important first step in preparing our community for the proposed increase. I would request that the Board take an active role in ensuring that these concerns are addressed.

Sincerely,

Ram Thackery

Cc:

Mr. James Hedly, President Eastern University

Dr. Lou Chambers, Vice President for Student Affairs

**APPENDIX B:** Summary of Organization Development (OD) Interventions

Organization development (OD) is a systematic approach to organizational improvement that uses behavioral science theory and research in order to increase individual and organizational well-being and effectiveness (French & Bell, 1990). It is a structured cycle of diagnosing organizational problems or opportunities, then applying expertise and interventions to solve them. While many OD intervention methods exist, below are three intervention methods which emphasize changing the organization itself.

**Survey Feedback.** Survey feedback is an intervention method whereby attitudes of organization members are solicited using a questionnaire. Once the data are collected and analyzed, they are fed back to the organization officials and members to diagnose problems and plan follow up interventions (Nicholas, 1982).

**Process Consultation.** Process consultation is an OD method that helps organization leaders and members improve the processes that are used in organizations. The processes most often targeted include communication, conflict resolution, decision making, group interaction and leadership.

Process consultation uses an outside consultant, whose role is to help organization members help themselves. Therefore, the ownership of a successful outcome rests with the organization members. The consultant guides the organization members in examining the processes in the organization and refining them. Process consultation consists of the following steps: entering the organization, defining the relationship, choosing an approach, gathering date and diagnosing problems, intervening, and gradually leaving the organization (Schein, 1998).

**Appreciative Inquiry**. Appreciative inquiry is the study of what gives life to an organizational system when they function at their best. As such, it attempts to break out of the problem solving mentality of other change interventions by focusing on the positive aspects of the organization. It searches for organizational strengths and capabilities, and then applies that knowledge throughout the organization for further success and well-being (Whitney & Trosten)Bloom, 2002).

Appreciative inquiry follows the “Four-D” process named after its four stages, discovery, dreaming, designing, and delivering. The discovery phase consists of identifying the positive events which took place in the organization. This usually involves interviewing organization members to discover a time when the organization was functioning at its best. This is followed by the dreaming stage where organization members envision what might be possible in an ideal organization. Stage three is designing, where organization members create a common image of what should be. In the final stage, delivering, participants establish specific objectives and direction for the organization to become the kind of organization that will realize the dreams and values of its members (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990).

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