

Neutralising ethnic and race challenges in a new nation

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Hardly a day passes without encountering communication in the public domain that relates to ethnic and race based challenges in our society. Most often, the messages continue entrenching the challenges rather than improving on the same. Apparently, nobody could have imagined the magnitude of the challenges, until the last general elections, when disagreements led to the post election violence.

Against this background, my team and I found ourselves in a difficult situation in February 2008. As the country continued experiencing the then ethnically driven violence, we were expected to conduct a scheduled training program for managers of a corporate organization. The challenge was how to successfully handle a tense team comprising participants from varying ethnic origins, amidst the ongoing flare ups. Naturally, there was no team harmony, a potentially hostile situation to the learning process.

Luckily, the process of critical thinking and analysis yielded some two unique solutions. The first one involved singing the entire national anthem at the beginning of the training process. (Incidentally, this practice is now continually taking shape in many forums). This was to be followed by an exercise of analysing the values expressed therein. The next cause of action borrowed from some lessons learnt in cultural studies. It involved development of training content on what is known as intercultural communications or interactions. We felt that most training programs on communications, largely address only personal and interpersonal aspects, the assumed basis of organizational communication.

As we thought, practical appreciation of global intercultural interactions could probably reverse the entrenched ethnic hatred, which naturally cascades to most workplace situations. Ideally, the aim was to create awareness on how our cultural backgrounds and value systems, universally affect conventional communication processes. Surprisingly, we got more than we could have expected as we conducted the training program.

An unusual aura of harmony coupled with appreciation of our brotherhood (and sisterhood), persisted throughout the two-day session. It seems that comprehension of the fundamental causes, and way out of these ethnic based challenges, is greatly boosted by these unique lessons on intercultural communications.

Subsequently, we never miss out walking through the content on intercultural communications whenever conducting training on communications, especially for corporate bodies. Of-course, the same boosts the internal and interpersonal communications content.

But, some experience in the month of May, was rather interesting and therefore worth sharing. This time, I was not handling our Kenyan brothers and sisters only. Rather, I was engaged with a mix of people from diverse backgrounds and countries, assembled in a Nairobi based international training centre. The 14 delegates comprised Sudanese, Malawians, an Italian, an Afghan, a Nigerian and just a few Kenyans.

The instructions were of course in English, a language that each of us has adopted, courtesy of the different education systems. Inevitably, each of the speakers in the training room is used to varying accents based on own cultural background. It is no wonder then that there was evident pronunciation based misunderstandings, until covering this section on intercultural communications.

Notably, the Italian constantly clarified the pronouncements of various simple English words. The Nigerian kept repeating herself for everybody to understand. It was a struggle following the Afghan's heavy accent. Even comprehending the discussions by the Sudanese was another great challenge. As the facilitator, I never came out clean either.

Without doubt, this is attributable to the language spoken where I was born and bred. The same does not have such letters as s, v, x and z amongst others. Almost always, there is no distinction between the pronunciation of L and R. Further, D and J must always be preceded by N. These observations may appear to be obvious or awkward to some. However, they are surprisingly rich sources of prejudices not only in workplace communication situations, but also national and social circumstances as well.

Apparently, none of the delegates had ever experienced that kind of training that normally lasts for only two hours. They had only witnessed comedians making fun of similar communication situations especially on television (remember the 'mind your language' TV shows). It is no wonder then that this section of the training became an eye opener and eventually the most popular area of study, during the two days spent with these international delegates.

Ideally, intercultural communication studies could provide solutions to numerous organisational, social and national interaction challenges that we are persistently experiencing. Interestingly, the studies also recognise the gaps in our value systems, whose continued abandonment has led us into becoming cultural orphans. Indeed, have we not embraced other people's values, sometimes at great costs to the society?

Certainly yes - we for example want to ride on the fast lane even when our circumstances do not allow. We end up getting involved in improprieties, which could otherwise have been avoided. This is ironically referred to as 'working smart' by many youthful Kenyans.

Seemingly, we need to embrace serious shifts on our value systems if we expect to achieve personal, organisational and national aspirations especially in a re-branded nation. Perhaps, it may be appropriate to borrow a leaf from the experiences of the international delegates that has just been discussed. But, it pays to realise that people already used to entrenched perspectives and behaviors, can only learn and change out of experiencing, rather than being told or bombarded with what may seem to be intellectual ideas.

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