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Attempts to transform an organization – diversity work in a Swedish Municipality

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This paper builds on a case study of diversity work in a Swedish municipality, Malmö. It focuses on certain actors partaking in the diversity work done in the municipality that of a gender and diversity committee and its members – here called diversity ambassadors. I will describe the work of the diversity ambassadors and discuss what impact they could possibly have on the organization.

Organizational efforts to change inequalities at the workplace may take different forms. The literature describes different ways to organize the diversity and equality work. In this paper I will focus a specific group of people assigned to do diversity work – so called diversity ambassadors (Omanović, 2006) or diversity champions (Subeliani & Tsogas, 2005). The diversity ambassadors are representatives of different departments and units of the organization. The ambassadors are convened in a committee in order to implement diversity initiatives at the various organizational levels on behalf of senior management. Such committees, which ideally should include representatives from different hierarchical levels of the organization, are typically charged with overseeing diversity initiatives, identifying potential remedies and monitoring progress (Kalev, Kelly, & Dobbin, 2006).

The committees may be made up of specially selected members, or open to all staff members.

Subeliani and Tsogas, (2005) for example studied a Dutch bank which has created a diversity

network of employees, the ‘ambassadors of diversity’, from various local branches and departments, hierarchical levels and different ethnic backgrounds. This network meets twice a year to discuss problems, achievements, ongoing projects and future plans related to diversity. Members receive regular newsletters and training, so that the network functions as an important tool to disseminate information about diversity and to raise awareness in the organization for this issue (Subeliani & Tsogas, 2005).

A diversity committee and its ambassadors are of course not enough to make substantial organizational changes for a more inclusive and equal organisation. Diversity work should be an integral part of all organizational activities (whether group or individual tasks) at all levels, i.e. from ‘top to bottom’. In addition, adequate resources must be made available: ‘If managers are to be expected to be responsible for a new function – managing diversity – then they should be given time and resources to make that effort useful’ (Pitts, 2007, p. 1581). Managing diversity should not just be one more task penciled onto an existing ‘to do’ list. If that happens it is likely that diversity work will not be taken seriously.

One way for the executive team to manifest their commitment to diversity is to allocate sufficient resources (Pitts, 2007). This refers not only to financial support, but also to time and decision-making powers. If senior management has decided that a diversity committee should be implemented, then it must also allocate a portion of the annual budget to attain the stipulated diversity goals of the committee. The diversity committee will soon lose enthusiasm and commitment if forced to make a formal application for funds for each individual initiative. Moreover, any employee who is asked to take part in the diversity committee must be allowed to arrange their work schedule accordingly. If staff is invited to participate in a diversity committee, senior management must give clear directives to the units and middle managers that these employees

should be permitted to take time off from their regular duties for attendance. Those with the responsibility for implementing the diversity activities decided upon in the committee should also be given the authority to make decisions regarding individual diversity initiatives. If the diversity committee is required to seek approval from higher ranking managers for each decision, employees will quickly perceive that senior management does not support the initiatives sufficiently to grant decision-making power to the responsible parties. Assigning responsibilities without the requisite authority for implementation is a recipe for disaster. It means frustration for the ambassadors dedicating their time to the diversity committee and may in the end lead to a failure for the committee.

This paper will present the work of a diversity and gender committee in Malmö municipality. Malmö is the third largest city in Sweden situated on the south-west coast of Sweden with a large population with foreign background. Out of the 286,000 inhabitants 29% are born abroad and 38% has a foreign background. The municipality has a political goal stating “The share of the municipality’s personnel with foreign background shall at all levels correspond to the share of the total population”. This political goal is important for the organizations’ diversity work as it together with two other political goals (aiming at equality between genders) and the new Swedish discrimination bill¹ forms the basis for the diversity work in the city.

Much of the diversity work in Malmö Stad is focused on more equal ethnic and gender representation. Each year the city publishes an annual report on personnel issues. The report for 2011 shows that by the end of 2011 about 28% of all employees and about 11% of all managers had foreign background. This indicates that while the city is rather good at employing people despite ethnic background, there are fewer non-ethnic Swedes at management levels. Malmö Stad has many

¹ The discrimination bill, 1 January 2009 aims at preventing discrimination based on gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age. The bill can be found at <http://www.notisum.se/rnp/sls/LAG/20080567.htm> and <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/11043/a/111986>

activities that are dominated by female employees (for example, child-care, elder-care and schools) and hence part of the diversity work is aimed at getting more male candidates to apply for job openings. By the end of 2011 about 73% of all employees and 65% of all managers were female. Of the 10.5% of managers with foreign background 70% were women.

If the goal is to gain a balance in the gender representation Malmö Stad is a very unequal organization as women are dominating both in number of employees and number of managers. It seems as if people with foreign background are rather well reflecting the population but representatives of the city council express that these employees are mainly represented at lower hierarchical levels and that the city should needs to change this situation.

This short description and the numbers will serve as a background to the case study that will be depicted below. Malmö Stad was chosen as a case because of its rather long work with diversity, being a rather diverse organization in terms of numbers as well as being a municipality with a population with a high degree of inhabitants with foreign background.

Method

The fieldwork commenced in May April 2008. In May 2008 I started to follow the work of a diversity and equality committee in the one of the city districts (the organization called it the diversity and gender committee). This group consists of representatives of different departments and units of the city district and has the task to promote diversity in the city district organization. I have followed the meetings and events of this group since May 2008. Until the end of 2010 I have observed about 16 meetings of the group and I have attended three diversity events, made three interviews in order to evaluate one of the events, and interviewed one HR employee chairing the group (since I started to observe the group the HR representative has changed three times). One

interview was conducted with an HR employee who earlier chaired the group but who at the time for the interview had changed job to central HR administration working with diversity management on an overall city organizational level. I have also attended an introduction day for new employees in order to listen to how the committee was presented for the new employees. More, I have interviewed the city district manager as this is the person with an overall responsibility for the diversity work in the city district.

During the observations field notes were taken and they were written out as soon as possible after the observation. During the work of making a fair copy of the notes some initial observations and analytical ideas were added to the field notes. Each interview has been transcribed *verbatim*. I will now turn to a description of the case.

The diversity and gender committee of the city district Southern Inner city (SI)

In the diversity plan of the city district SI the diversity and gender committee has an important role in the district's diversity work. Established back in 2001, the diversity committee has a vital role for the diversity work in the city district. The diversity plan for 2008/2009 indicated that '*the diversity committee is responsible for coordinating all diversity work. The committee shall function as a source of inspiration and as an engine for change. It shall also be responsible for the follow-up and evaluation of diversity work. It shall propose goals and measures to be taken in cooperation with each department. The representatives in the committee shall act as their department's diversity expert, contributing to the initiation and execution of active diversity work.*'

The committee meets several times per semester (it has been everything from twice up to eight times). Part of their work is on a diversity management level in that they are responsible for the diversity plan being written, and followed up. They have also earlier made employee surveys on

different topic related to equality and diversity. Much of their work is however focused on creating positive attitudes towards diversity in the organisation. The committee members do not participate in the committee work as parts of their ordinary jobs and the diversity work is not part of their job descriptions, instead they are allowed time off from their jobs in order to participate in the committee meetings. Over the years, the committee members become more and more frustrated over how the diversity and gender committee is organised, and what influence their work may have on the organization. This frustration culminated at a committee meeting in the fall 2010.

A critical incident in the diversity and gender committee

At this meeting the city district administrative director was invited to the meeting. The committee members hoped that the director would give them the clear mandate for their work they had asked for. For some time the committee members had been uncertain what was expected of them as diversity ambassadors.

According to the city district's diversity plan the group was responsible for devising and implementing most of the diversity work. In reality, however, they were not granted the necessary resources to meet these obligations. The most serious problem was a lack of time. The members of the committee came from different departments and units of the city district, as well as various hierarchical levels. Although the original intention was to find representatives from all departments, members could only be found to represent a few of the departments. There were several reasons for this, for example, some managers would not allow their subordinates to take time off for such an engagement, others felt that the diversity work done by the committee was not acknowledged by the organization, another reason could be that most employees were not aware of the existence of the committee. Despite the reasons, the inability to find representatives from all departments was one of the problems the committee constantly tried to handle. While all members of the committee were

dedicated to promoting diversity and gender issues, at the same time they had full time jobs to carry out. Their unit or department managers had all agreed they could take time off for the committee meetings, but did not schedule extra time for the performance of other diversity tasks. For this reason many committee members were forced to work on diversity issues in their spare time.

For example, most committee members were also trained as game leaders for the Diversity Board Game. The diversity board game is one diversity initiative which is aimed at all city employees (about 20,000). The purpose of the game is to train people in diversity and discrimination matters (for example the new discrimination bill) and to allow people to discuss experiences of discrimination or experienced situations where gender equality or diversity has been an issue. The game is played in groups of four to five people. There is no winner of the game, instead the objective is to learn and to discuss and share experiences. Game leaders were supposed to act as facilitators during the game, and most committee members are trained to perform this role. As many of the employees in the city district have jobs where they cannot leave the work site during work time (for example, teachers, pre-school teachers, nurses) meetings and activities which included all employees had to be scheduled at night. One of the game sessions I attended was for a number of pre-schools in the city district and it took place in the evening. Three of committee members were there acting as game leaders, something which they were not paid for, and which was probably not recognised by their managers (except for one who's manager was also there as the person as a pre-school teacher).

Another scarce resource for the committee was money. For a couple of years it had received a budget of equivalent to about 2500 Euros to spend on diversity and gender lectures. Money for any other planned activities had to be applied for to the administrative manager separately.

A further difficulty facing the committee members was that they lacked decision-making authority. Every time the committee wanted to implement a diversity activity they were required to seek

permission from either the HR manager or the administrative director of the city district. Thus they had the responsibility for diversity work without the requisite authority. Unsurprisingly, the committee members became more and more frustrated with their situation. They felt that they had been charged with carrying out diversity work without being given the necessary resources to do so.

The committee was given no orientation or clear objectives regarding their work from the city district management team, yet when they came up with suggestions for diversity issues, these ideas were frequently rejected. On the other hand, the district authorities were very proud of the diversity work which had been carried out by the committee. The committee had served as an example for other city districts during its first years due to its many successful activities. The management team was also pleased to highlight the large number of employees with an immigrant background working in the city district.

A number of incidents over the years had made the group members aware of a lack of support for diversity work within the organization. Diversity lectures which they had organized were poorly attended due to a lack of publicity, combined with the fact that managers of several units did not allow their staff to take part because of time pressures. One former group member was forced to quit because his manager said that the diversity committee work was a low priority. A few weeks before the September meeting an introduction day for newly hired employees had been held. This event takes place twice a year and always opens with a welcoming speech by the administrative director, followed by a 15 minute presentation by the diversity committee. On this occasion the administrative director had spoken for so long that there was no time left for the committee members to make their presentation. Six committee members had taken time off their normal duties to participate in this presentation, and now they were not given the opportunity to talk about the committee and its activities.

Lately there had been some tension between the HR representatives and the other committee members. For many years diversity work had been the responsibility of the HR representative, meaning that whatever was decided by the group, the HR representative was responsible for implementation. Although this was no longer the case, the change of responsibilities was not communicated to the other committee members. Whereas the new HR representatives expected everybody to share the workload, the other group members argued they did not have the time to take on extra tasks outside the committee meetings.

Back at the September meeting, the administrative director entered the room. The committee members started to tell him about their concerns regarding diversity, about the objectives of their diversity work, about the committee's role and how its work should be organized and implemented. The administrative director did not offer any direct answers. Instead he pointed out how well the district was dealing with diversity in terms of the numbers of employees with an immigrant background. After about an hour's discussion the director ended the meeting by urging the group members to write down their questions regarding the future of the committee and their ideas regarding diversity work, and send them to the city district management team. Then he left.

The committee members were naturally rather disappointed, being left with the feeling that they had not received any answers to their questions and demands. Nonetheless, it was decided that (as suggested) they would use their next meeting to write down some questions and demands to be sent to the management team. A couple of weeks after the September meeting the group received an e-mail from the convening HR representative. The e-mail read:

'Dear all

I have now received an answer from the administrative director. The decision is that due to the current heavy work load at the HR department, the diversity committee and the development of the diversity work in the city district must wait until after the New Year. This means that the three meetings planned for the autumn are cancelled.

Kind regards

HR rep.

Discussion

Diversity literature emphasizes that in order for diversity work to be successful a number of basic conditions need to be fulfilled. One basic condition is that if diversity management is to have an impact on daily organizational life, it must be incorporated into all existing levels and practice (Risberg, 2010). Ideally, an organization's diversity policy, diversity management and diversity initiatives should issue from the very top in order to be perceived as credible and worthwhile (Müller & Sander, 2005; Pitts, 2007). In addition, line and middle managers must be directly involved in diversity programmes and encouraged to feel that they have something to gain from these initiatives, rather than regarding them as just another obligation (Foster & Harris, 2005; Müller & Sander, 2009).

Even though the diversity work was based in a political goal the initiatives for the diversity work was not really initiated from the administrative top. The administrative director did not show much interest in the diversity work, neither did the HR director. Most initiatives came from the diversity and gender committee, and their suggestions were often not supported from the top. For, example, a proposed schedule for the diversity board game, was not granted by the HR director. More it was not clear who the committee reported to. Even though the HR representatives said that they were not responsible for organizing or executing the diversity work, it was the HR director who said yes or no

to their proposals. The introductory day for new employees, where the administrative director did allow time for the committee members to talk, was probably the final and most clear sign to the committee members that the diversity work was not supported by the top.

More, the problem of recruiting committee members indicates that unit managers could not see what they should gain from diversity initiatives. The same was reflected in the problem of getting people to attend the events arranged by the committee.

Another way for the executive team to manifest their commitment to diversity is to allocate sufficient resources (Pitts, 2007). This refers not only to financial support, but also to time and decision-making powers. If senior management has decided that a diversity programme should be implemented, then it must also allocate a portion of the annual budget to attain the stipulated goals. The diversity manager or the diversity committee will soon lose enthusiasm and commitment if forced to make a formal application for funds for each individual initiative. Moreover, any employee who is asked to take part in the diversity programme must be allowed to arrange their work schedule accordingly. If staff are invited to participate in a diversity committee, senior management must give clear directives to the units and middle managers that these employees should be permitted to take time off from their regular duties for attendance. Likewise, all staff members should be given the time to participate in diversity training measures. Those with the responsibility for implementing the diversity programme should also be given the authority to make decisions regarding individual diversity initiatives. If the diversity manager or the diversity committee is required to seek approval from higher ranking managers for each decision, employees will quickly perceive that senior management does not support the initiatives sufficiently to grant decision-making power to the responsible parties. Assigning responsibilities without the requisite authority for implementation is a

recipe for disaster. It means frustration for those responsible for a diversity programme, and in the end failure for the programme itself (Risberg, Beauregard, & Sander, 2012).

The diversity and gender committee in the city district were not provided sufficient resources, neither in terms of money nor time. They experienced pressure from their ordinary jobs when spending time on the diversity work, and they felt guilty for not contributing enough to the diversity work. Even though it was stated at a political as well as top management level that one should be allowed time to participate in the committee work, this was apparently not clearly communicated to the unit managers who did not allow time for the committee's diversity work outside the meetings. The result was that the committee members became more and more uncertain of their mission as well as felt frustration from not being able to do the job better.

Senior management as well as the provision of resources has a pivotal role in initiating and legitimizing the diversity work in an organization. In particular, middle managers and the human resource department play a key role in implementing diversity policy and strategies on a day-to-day basis. The commitment of all these actors is essential to successfully establish a culture of diversity and inclusion (Risberg et al., 2012). The diversity committee in the city district did not get this support.

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