

Diversity's not a dirty word

By [Dionne Kerr](#)

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Many articles have been written to give input into managing diversity. Professionals with years of experience will give good advice on how to manage the issues of equal opportunity and diversity in an increasingly diverse society.



More and more businesses are seeking advice on how to address the issues of diversity. The continent of Africa is a melting pot of language, religion, tradition, and cultural issues. An increasing emphasis on 'People with Disabilities' and 'Women Equality' adds a further dynamic in considering a 'best practice' approach.

In most countries that we work in, we see increasing pressure being placed on society to encourage and create 'equal opportunity' environments. As the momentum behind cultural diversity and equality increases, so too will we need to look internally at our perceptions, our stereotypes and our organisational paradigms that may negatively impact the achievement of our goals in the long term.

Aside from the much-debated West vs. East and West vs. Africa approaches, a bigger conversation is starting to unfold. The realisation that our customer base is becoming more diverse suggests that if our motivation for diversity doesn't come from an overwhelming sense of commitment to equality, then it should be driven by the need to ensure that our business strategy is relevant to our customers.

Customers are evolving

Customers are becoming more educated, more discerning and more specific in their buying choices and their approach to sourcing service providers. Brand reputation, hiring policies and community development now all serve a role in this process and therefore are more than just 'nice to have' policies, but rather need to become a fundamental of the operating procedure that is locally relevant within each operating market.

Businesses looking to operate across Africa need to realise that a blanket approach will not do - the continent is a beautiful, handmade quilt; a patchwork of individual and unique pieces joined together to form something that has the same purpose but also an individual beauty. If we try and make each of those pieces look the same, then we lose the beauty and it just becomes another blanket that has required extensive effort to transform.

People-centric approach

We need to make people central to our strategy for operating on the African continent. Our business approach therefore needs to be people-centric at every level. The right business leader for the African continent will be someone who has a strong human element to their management approach and who takes the time to understand their customer market, listen to customers' needs and then devises an appropriate business strategy to meet those needs.

The ability to build relationships is pivotal to business success in Africa. The relationships with key customers, with supplier partners, with employee communities and the understanding and conversations with our customers are key factors for success.

The objectives of localisation all over the world suggest that companies need to consider the employment of local people and create an environment where the benefit that remains in a country is able to be evidenced. There is no greater way to do this than to create jobs, provide a platform for learning and development and build competence within the core and critical business activities.

Equality is an ethos and creates an environment that supports the power that lies in diversity. A successful business will capture the spirit of the local environment to make sure it is relevant to its customer market and the employee community. This must be done in a way that retains the organisational commitment to excellence. The appreciation of diversity in a way that is relevant to the local market should never detract from the operating excellence that a business needs to remain competitive in the global market.

Not mutually exclusive

If the diversity strategy includes a strong framework for engagement then we will leverage from the views, opinions, culture and ethos of our local employees to develop a model that is unique and local but still captures the commercial drivers of profitability, sustainability and excellence that links back to the global vision.

Global excellence can be achieved in a manner that has local relevance, but to achieve this, we need to see diversity not as an HR transaction or policy, but rather as a strategic factor that must be unpacked and understood to establish our competitive advantage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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