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African American Managers Experiences in Companies Identified as “Learning Organizations”

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Abstract: *This paper summarizes the results of a qualitative study where the purpose was to explore how the learning organization impacted African American managers. Based on these findings, practice and future research for HRD and adult education is suggested.*

Since 1990, and the publication of Peter Senge’s book, *The Fifth Discipline*, there had been much discussion in the HRD and adult education literature on the learning organization (LO). Senge conceptualized the LO as an organization that emphasizes continuous learning in order to make the organization more effective, along with the five disciplines of personal mastery, systems thinking, team learning, uncovering mental models and shared vision. In the past 10 years, there’s been much research on the LO, and the findings of these studies fall into three primary themes. The major themes include: the role of management in the LO (Coad & Berry, 1998; Ellinger, 1997; Ellinger, et al, 1999; Hodgkinson, 2000; Johnson, 2002) the performance of LO (Benabou, 1999; Ellinger, et al, 2000; Simonin, 1997; Terziovski, et al., 2000; Voss et al., 1997), and how to effectively implement the LO (Albert, 1998; Barker & Camarata, 1998; Bell et al, 2002; Bierema & Berdish, 1999; Elkjaer, 2001; Griego et al, 2000; Thomsen & Hoest, 2001). In critiquing the research based literature, Howell, Schied, & Carter (2001) observe that while Senge and those who rely on his work, do focus on learning and productivity in the organization, they tend to focus on instrumental learning. Further, both Dirkx (1999) and Mojab and Gorman (2003) highlight that there is limited research on how sociocultural and political contextual factors intermingle within the LO. Further, Bierema (1998) concluded that the experiences of ethnic and gender minority groups, in the research, are ignored yet these issues “have the most impact on organizational dynamics” (¶16). There has been little research on how race affects learning in the so-called LOs.

There has been some discussion, however, about diversity in the workplace (Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Gregory, 1999) but thus far this has remained separate from discussions about the LO. The literature does highlight the fact that there are differences between the career development of African Americans which has not been represented in the mainstream career development literature. In particular, there is a lack of mentoring relationships for African Americans and this affects their ability to climb the corporate ladder and gain the knowledge about the power relations and the culture of the organization (Barrett, Cervero & Bailey, 2003; Corsun & Costen, 2001; Palmer, 2002). Furthermore, while much of the LO literature focuses on the experiences of managers, there is a dearth of literature on African American managers (Collins 1989, 1997). As a result of the lack of research on race and the LO, the primary purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of African American managers within so called “learning organizations.”

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was two-fold. First, the study was informed by the literature on the LO, as well as critiques of it (Fenwick, 2000). Second, a theoretical framework was needed that understood the historical and social implications of race, and that critiques power relations in society based on structural factors of race, gender, and class as have others in adult education (Sheared & Sissel, 2001; Guy, 1999). Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly guided by the thinking of Cornel West (1994) and Gloria Ladson-Billing (1999) was used to illuminate the understanding of the participants and bring the experiences of African-Americans to the forefront and to highlight social structures that promote racism and inequalities. There are several central tenets to CRT as summarized by Carbado & Gulati (2003). First, race is a social construction that has been invented by the dominant culture to categorize and subjugate individuals that are not part of the dominant culture. As a result, racism has become a normal part of society and steeped in the fabric of America. Second, whiteness functions as a system of privilege. This means that the dominant culture becomes the norm or the standard to which all others strive to meet. Third, race impacts and determines how marginalized individuals will fare in society. This means that race can influence not only how an individual is viewed but also how an individual will interact within society (i.e., an outsider that assimilates in the dominant culture will fare better).

Methodology

This was a qualitative study informed by the basic interpretative approach. According to Merriam (2002), a basic interpretive approach is an interactive process examining how people interacting with the world on a daily basis create meanings as a result of this interaction. A purposeful sample was selected of African American managers from among those who: a) work in the private sector; b) have been with the same employer for at least three years, and c) work in companies that were identified by prior research by Watkins & Marsick (1993) and/or Marquardt & Reynolds (1994) as learning organizations. Thirteen African American managers were interviewed. The data were transcribed and analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2002). Member checks were conducted to enhance dependability.

Findings

The findings discussed here focus on three aspects of the study: (1) the importance of taking advantage of learning opportunities to further their career development; (2) race relations in African American positive companies; and (3) an implicit rather than explicit knowledge of the learning organization.

Taking Advantage of Learning Opportunities

Participants took advantage of both formal and informal learning opportunities that were an integral part of the managers' career development.

Formal learning. Most of the managers found formal learning opportunities worthwhile; specifically, they spoke highly of attaining graduate degrees and pursuing on the job training programs. For example, when Clarice began working in corporate America she already possessed an MBA but little work related experienced. She entered a management development program (MDP) to gain more knowledge. Clarice stated, "I

thought it was an excellent curriculum, at least for someone coming out of school and only having a year of work experience.” Thus, the MDP served to socialize these managers into their new roles.

Informal learning. These managers engaged in informal learning as a means to understand the workings of corporate America and ultimately facilitate their career development. For instance, informal learning was integral to many of the managers understanding the unspoken rules of career development in corporate America, such as career progression. By observing the careers of those within the organization, they found that performance was not the only factor in career progression. There was a networking aspect that they needed to foster and they communicated with entities that could help them make informed career choices.

Learning through mentors. Learning through mentors was the most integral career development component for these managers. Mentors are important for individuals that are charting their way into unknown territory; these managers were the first in their families to enter corporate America. Therefore, their aspirations to enter management were more arduous because their parents did not possess the knowledge and skills to transfer to them. Furthermore, once they entered corporate America they had to locate individuals that were willing to assist them with their career development.

One major theme that emerged was the importance of having mentors both from one’s own culture and from the dominant culture. White male mentors were critical to these managers because they were in positions of power (within the organization) thus they were in a position to help advance the careers of these managers. Geri, for example reported, “[This White male mentor] would teach me how to maneuver the organization from a White perspective, which was quite helpful...I think it’s as important to have somebody that’s not the same race or a White male if you can that supports you. Because they can maneuver you through the organization quicker than somebody of color can.” Similarly, other managers sought out White males to mentor them because they were in positions of power and could enhance their career progression.

Race Relations in African American Positive Learning Organizations

The overwhelming majority of the participants in this research were satisfied with their current organization, as indicated partially by the duration of their career with the same organization. Organizations also enhanced their satisfaction by sponsoring and supporting diversity efforts, with diversity managers and African American networking groups. Nevertheless, these organizations were a microcosm of the larger society in dealing with race; thus there were limitations on such equity efforts, which did impact some aspect of their career.

Microcosm of society While there are important opportunities that LOs provide for these managers, there were limits imposed by the dominant culture, such that, the general dynamics present in the larger culture around power relations between dominant and oppressed groups, were of course present to some extent within these organizations. Generally, these managers reported the following themes: the preponderance of low numbers of African American managers, the marginalization of management positions, and the problem of “comfort” hiring and mentoring. Two of these are discussed below.

Problems of “comfort” hiring and mentoring. One component that hindered African Americans career opportunities was “comfort” hiring and mentoring. While

none of the managers felt that his or her company overtly practiced discrimination in hiring or promotion, racial nepotism was an aspect that several managers felt impacted how they were treated within the organization. One aspect that some of the participants discussed was that managers hired and promoted employees that they felt comfortable with. Barry described, "I'm talking [about] an ingrown racism that says I hire people who like me... I don't think it's intentional racism for the majority of the managers that we have...but it's just like you're comfortable hiring somebody who plays the sports you play...who goes to the churches you go to, [and engages in] the things you do and that's your comfort level." Several managers reported that racial nepotism affected hiring and promotion decisions, which resulted in their being overlooked for promotions and other career opportunities.

Marginalized management opportunities. The career opportunities that were offered to African American managers within the LO was limited. They were so dedicated to advancing their careers, that several managers accepted marginalized management positions. These positions were marginalized for specific reasons. First, there was a lack of competition for these management roles. Second, other potential candidates were not interested in the prospect of taking the role because there were problems surrounding the position. Florence described that her ascent into upper management came when she accepted a marginalized position. She stated, "they were trying to separate internal learning and external learning, but keep it under one learning organization. And everybody wanted to be on the external side because that's where you make the money and you're on commission...I raised my hand and said fine I'll do it." When Florence accepted this position, she moved into an upper management role, nevertheless, it did not generate the sales commission like the external position. In fact, several managers reported that accepting these marginalized positions enabled them to enter management or earn a promotion. However, these promotions were fraught with an element of contention.

Implicit Rather than Explicit Knowledge of the Learning Organization

While the managers were employed by organizations identified as LOs, they apparently were not educated by the company about the concept of "the learning organization". Only one manager was familiar the concept, probably because she was responsible for training and development across the organization, whereas, the rest of the participants did not have an overt training function, rather they were responsible for increasing the bottom line. Thus they were not as schooled in the LANGUAGE of the LO. In essence, they seemed to implicitly know HOW to implement a LO, and made use of many of the disciplines of the LO such as systems thinking, team learning. However, they more or less accepted the vision of the company as put forth by top management, and felt that it was their job to implement that vision. Thus the extent to which the vision was actually "shared" is questionable.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this research brings greater clarity to the literature and offers additional insights. Clearly, the rules of corporate America have been established by the dominant culture, and outsiders are not automatically privileged to have the knowledge that will ensure their success (Barrett et al., 2003b; Corsun & Costen, 2001; Palmer,

2002). First, mentoring was the most significant component that the participants used to gain the knowledge that they needed to compete in a setting that was not part of their culture. The findings of this research suggest that these African American managers largely took responsibility for their own learning. This aligns with the previous literature related to African Americans in management (Barrett, et al., 2003a; Corsun & Costen, 2001; Palmer, 2002).

The participants in this study were satisfied with their employers and most had remained their whole career with the same company. While some of the managers made significant strides in their career progression, they attributed this to their hard work. This response would closely align with approaches which assert that the individual is responsible for his or her progress, that many critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1999; West, 1999) critique as too individualistic. However, these managers realized that they were chosen by members of the dominant culture for positions as managers, and they wanted to remain, and felt they had to “play the game”; this game was abiding by the norms of corporate America (Carbado & Gulati, 2003). From a critical race theory perspective, Carbado and Gulati (2003) assert that within the workplace there is a process of first, selecting individuals (i.e., hiring) that are willing and have the capacity to take on the dominant culture characteristics. Second, they also suggest that to be successful, the individual needs to integrate and become socialized into the workplace in accordance with the dominant culture. Therefore, these managers knew that their employer had some level of expectation of them (i.e., how they should respond to being a part of corporate America). To overtly challenge or not to be socialized into the dominant culture could have negative ramifications (i.e., lack of career opportunities). Thus, in order to survive there is great pressure to “fit in.”

In addition, in order to progress in one’s career, there were concessions that these managers made. One compromise was that they took marginalized positions, and worked harder than their White counterparts. These findings are similar to previous studies (Collins, 1989, 1997; Durr & Logan, 1997) which found that African Americans were offered positions that dealt with either serving African American markets (i.e., affirmative action) or non-essential positions (i.e. management positions that did not give them the responsibility they needed to move into senior management roles). Particularly, in this study, marginalized management positions were less competitive and problem laden. However, these managers obtained these positions with the intent of succeeding against all odds.

In conclusion, the findings of this research have major implications for the field of adult education. First, it augments the literature on African American managers and sheds some light upon their experiences. Exploring the LO, in this context, revealed that the learning that was promoted, furthered the interest of the dominant culture and these managers achieved their goals despite insurmountable odds. Second, organizations need to take a proactive stance to increasing more African Americans in management. While these managers were proactive in their career development, organizations need to support learning opportunities that will enhance their career development such as mentoring relationships. While further research needs to be conducted exploring the role of race and white privilege in “learning organizations”, this study offers a beginning look at some of these dynamics in corporate America.

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