

CONSIDERING ORGANIZATION CULTURE IN EMPLOYMENT EQUITY PLANNING

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À mesure que les gouvernements du niveau fédéral, provincial et municipal prennent plus d'intérêt au pouvoir émergeant des électrices, la législation pour l'égalité des chances devient un jeu de football politique. Les femmes deviennent de plus en plus astucieuses dans l'utilisation de cet intérêt des gouvernements.

Les lents progrès dans nos organisations ont besoin d'un coup de main! Les auteures de cet article s'adressent à deux aspects importants du développement organisationnel – l'environnement extérieur dans lequel commence à poindre un mouvement vers l'équité dans l'emploi, et les attitudes et les valeurs enracinées, qui ont évolué pendant plusieurs générations de gestion, pour diriger la prise de décisions et le partage du pouvoir.

More than twenty years after the landmark United States' Equal Pay Act of 1963, women still confront statistics revealing that we earn less than 70% of men's salaries. In the face of staggering amounts of analysis, documentation, strategizing, public discussion and political pressure, the placement of women in non-traditional jobs, executive suites and boardrooms nonetheless increases at a barely discernible rate.

The pressure for change may be intensifying. In Canada, equal opportunity legislation is a political football game that federal, provincial and even municipal governments play: they have been compelled to become more concerned about women as an important voting sector. Women in turn are becoming more politically astute in building on government concern.

The concern of the politicians – and the fact of pending federal legislation – are not lost on corporate leaders. Awareness is growing that contract compliance in any form eventually could be felt in their bottom lines. Many have known for a long time that female staff are restive and expecting substantive change.

Political, economic and social trends are finally starting to move together and should eventually create the level of intensity needed to provoke changes across the Canadian workplace. The slow processes of change inside our organizations need some help!

The duration and degree of resistance to female representation in the workplace, despite the number and variety of attempts to displace it, begs more than the traditional approaches of analysis and planning. Cost, disruption of the status quo, and discomfort with change are factors to be considered. The active nature of the resistance also suggests broader and more complex reasons that demand an expanded context for problem analysis and solution design. This larger context includes two important aspects – the externally apparent organizational environment in which movement toward employment equity is beginning to take place, as well as the deeply held set of attitudes and values that have evolved over many generations of management to govern the practices of decision-making and power-sharing. For the purposes of this article the term 'culture' refers to the combination of how people perceive the environment and their behaviour in response to it.

In her recent Royal Commission Report, *Equality in Employment*, Judge Rosalie Abella said that corporate employment practices can not be assessed fairly in a cultural vacuum. We would add that neither can changes to employment and promotion practices be planned for and implemented in a cultural vacuum. While people intuitively agree with this point, the concept of culture remains unclear. Most of us would be hard pressed to say clearly why change and culture are so intimately linked.

Affirmative action or employment equity change generally follows two approaches: change in access to employment in a wide range of occupational roles, and change in the barriers and con-

ditions in the workplace that hold women back from equal participation. Meaningful change in access and participation certainly requires change in the way people work together and in the patterns of work that have become the norm in any workplace. Whenever patterns of relationship and norms of behaviour change, the culture is affected.

What is THE CULTURE? Even anthropologists don't agree on a single definition. One group focuses on symbols such as the flag and on how groups of people who share the symbol's common meaning seem to have shared understandings about their symbols. For cultural anthropologists the concern is with values, and how those who share the same values and beliefs often share the same basis for their behaviour, thus sharing a sense of the meaning of things around them. Current jargon in the corporate field has given the term a slightly different meaning – "How we do things around here." Organization theorists use a definition with some application to our subject.

Professor Sathe of Harvard has a working definition: "Culture is the set of important understandings that members of a community have in common." It is the way members of a community organize their experiences and then use the shared understanding of those experiences to guide their behaviour. People in a culture come to hold common values. They have the same beliefs about cause and effect and, based on these similarities in values and belief, they tend to act in similar fashions. This explanation of culture can provide us with a framework to examine both the importance of Judge Abella's comments on employment practices and culture and our views that culture and change are intimately related.

The beliefs women hold about their opportunities and advancement in their organizations are very often quite different from the beliefs of the management and many of the men. The values generating the beliefs are also quite different.

While the organization would typically say "the doors are open, anyone may apply for a job," a female applicant would see that the interviewer was not encouraging, that the salary scale may be lower than for a male applicant, and that she may be the only woman amongst a large male population. Women value relationships, human support, and equal money to provide the necessities; what may be seen by management as technically equal access is not perceived as such by women in human terms.

Advancement up the salary scale and into new occupational opportunities (such as non-traditional or newly developed jobs) is also seen by women and their organizations through different values and beliefs. Typically an organization's management would believe and say sincerely that they operate on a merit system and that they reward good performance. Both men and women employees would question their honest belief based on the behaviour they see. Women, however, have a statistical basis for our disbelief; our experience shows we are unlikely to be given development opportunities to equip us for significant advancement. Routinely women are given skills training associated with their current positions, but not training such as cross assignment exposures or personal development programs related to future-potential assignments. We draw the conclusion that the organization values personal development of men, future higher level assignments for men, and thus shows a marked preference for men as its upwardly mobile group. As men now hold all but a few of the most senior jobs and the accompanying power to maintain the posture, they may see no need to change what they value. Women believe advancement requires many sacrifices and the salary ladder may lean against a wall too high for us to scale – not at all unreasonable assumptions given the persistence of the problems for upwardly mobile women.

In employment equity change we are working from almost opposing belief structures between women and the organization's management. To effect change in the direction of the goals of employment equity some of these differences eventually will need to be confronted. Pressure alone from the law or the interest groups will not address the gut issues of beliefs and values which are the basis for



Illustration by Christine Roche

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the discriminatory and not well understood behaviours of management.

How can we take these cultural differences into account when addressing employment equity change? The nature of the differences is profound enough to suggest that women are a cultural sub-set in many organizations. They do not share the same meaning as the organization on the subjects of equal access to jobs, advancement, development opportunities, equity of earnings and the organization's responses to human needs. Before change – usually initiated by those in power – occurs in the directions espoused in employment equity and towards more human values, the degree of these differences will need to be reduced so that people can be working in the same direction. When those who are creating plans are at odds with those for whom they are intended, it is unlikely that those inappropriate plans will be implemented.

Understanding this connection between culture and change leads to the

conclusion that something more than the routine planning model of 'plan – analyze – implement and evaluate' is needed to address a values-based issue like employment equity. Routine planning is what we use when we want to make routine changes such as introducing a new procedure, altering the budget process or changing the layout of the desks. Employment equity changes are multifaceted, values-laden and thus anything but routine.

Changes involving what people believe about working together, or the styles and methods of hiring new employees, or the redesign and implementation of new progression and promotion policies are complex. Shared understanding between the people involved in the change about the issues they face is one component. Agreement about goals and how they should be met is another. A mutual understanding of the service or business and overall cultural environment in which the change is taking place is essential.

How the change will affect other aspects of the organization is important. The plan for change must fit the capacity of the organization to put it into effect, yet work toward the kind of organization that is intended – a rather tall order, but, we believe essential for values-based change to occur.

This more cultural perspective on change also includes the more routine aspects of planning. The cultural perspective on change prescribes that a group, a microcosm of those involved or affected by the change, participate in the planning. These participants are the bearers of the organization's culture. Their involvement ensures that the various beliefs and values are represented in the planning process. In this way the fit of the plans to the current culture and to the group's vision of the future for which it wants to strive is accomplished.

A small example may help to make the case and clarify these points. The management team of a large computing centre became concerned that the nature of the work, which held people to tight deadlines and required long hours of sitting, was having a poor effect on employee health and was resulting in less than optimal productivity. An investment in employee health would, they reasoned, eventually bring better productivity, but the net improvement in employee well being alone would be worth the effort and expense. This was a significant change in emphasis, indeed a shift in values, prior to which first consideration would have been given to the costs of a health program and the immediate return on the investment.

The medical department was instructed to design and mount a series of health-related programs like fitness, nutrition counselling, weight-watchers, yoga, and smokers anonymous, to name just a few. Fitness facilities and showers were built, and equipment purchased at considerable cost. The programs were very well received and within a short period a noticeable change was taking place.

Several months after the programs started, the personnel manager was called in to discuss a problem that had become a *cause célèbre* between the building services people and a group of employees. The issue involved the purchase of a bicycle rack for the parking lot. Many employees as part of their fitness program were now bringing bicycles to work, and

during the day taking cycling exercise breaks. The problem for the building people was that they had not budgeted for a rack. The issue of health was never raised; the dispute centered around expenditure. The problem was resolved when the management involved the supervisors and middle managers in discussions about placing greater emphasis on employee health and on recognizing the connections between health and costs – a significant shift from considering cost as the primary, if not only, concern.

The decisions about employee health had been made in isolation. Management had not involved staff in their decision making, in managing and in such areas as budget control. Naturally, there was resistance: there was no shared understanding about primary values, there were no agreed-upon goals, nor was thought given to the nature of a values-based change in management decision making. While in this case the problem was not a large one, it exemplifies the misunderstandings and resistance that can arise when different values are at play or when values change. How much more difficult will a values-based shift on women's issues be than one in which *everyone* cares equally about the issue?

The processes that the microcosm group pass through as they pursue a cultural perspective on affirmative action change are extraordinarily important. The members will need to understand deeply each other's values, beliefs and behaviours as they are enacted in the workplace. They will need to question how these have maintained women in subordinate positions. As this is the workplace, the learning about these will naturally occur in the process of the employment equity discussion, planning and analysis. Introspection will also be necessary – and not easy!

True change seems to be a possibility NOW. As we have already noted, pressure for change is building up in the public sphere. The subject of employment equity change has become higher on the political agenda. It is vitally important for Canada in terms of international trade to make intelligent use of all of its human resources. These include a well educated and underutilized group of women, visible minorities, native peoples and the handicapped. Together they make up

60% of the Canadian workforce. Not to be overlooked is the economic effect of employment equity change. Judge Abella notes that the United States has enjoyed a 50% return on its affirmative action investment. The return would have been higher had not early special program costs been so high. At present there appears to be a convergence of political, economic and social pressures for change presenting women and organizations jointly with a special set of opportunities.

There is a window of opportunity open in the next five years for us either to enter or see closed. The period of rapid growth following the Second World War saw the influx of thousands of men into every type of position, many of which had been held by women during the war years. Those men are now arriving at retirement age and are due to leave active employment within the next few years. In a period of lower growth which presents women with few opportunities, this window of change becomes an important planning period.

Also the less conservative thinkers from the campuses of the early sixties are entering decision making roles. Many may be more amenable to changes within organizations than their more conservative parents. The men of this era have been exposed to feminist partners, colleagues, and sisters. They may be more flexible and sympathetic to employment equity changes. They will also soon be looking for career success for their own daughters.

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