

Diversity Management: An Overlook on Brazil's Largest Companies

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Abstract

This article outlines the results of qualitative research on Diversity Management carried out with Brazil's 20 largest companies. The objective of the study was to map the perception of employees and managers on Diversity in the context of the organizations, confronting the corporate discourse with the perspective of professionals who identify with this theme. Therefore, we interviewed, using qualitative techniques, managers of 12 out of 20 national companies and 45 employees, representing all selected companies. The results show a very incipient management in Brazilian companies, with a discourse that is little aligned to the practice and almost no practical demonstration of results, perceived by employees with mistrust and a sense of exclusion.

Keywords: Diversity; Organizational Culture; Organizational Communication; Inclusion; Employee Communication.

Introduction

Brazil has a very mixed population. Brazilian's physical expression reflects the country's more than five centuries of history, scarred by hundreds of thousands of immigrations, centuries of slave trade, and remnants of native traits. This high level of miscegenation resulted in a population currently comprised of 53.6% of individuals declaring themselves as black or mulatto (IBGE, 2014).

One does not have to take a deep plunge into the reality of Brazil's largest organizations to acknowledge that these figures are not reflected in their higher ranks. According to Instituto Ethos (2016), in Brazil's 500 largest companies, only 4.7% of executive positions are held by black people of mulattoes. The discrepancy showed by numbers is not an isolated fact. Other figures corroborate this reality in the labor market: even though 51.4% of the population is female (IBGE, 2014), women make up only 11% of Brazilian management boards (Ethos, 2016). Also, in this country 61% of all LGBT professionals hide their sexual orientation in their professional environments (CTI, 2016).

These data – and a series of other quantitative reports released by different business publications – have contributed to the growth of studies on diversity in the organizational context since the 1980s (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009). To Oliveira and Domingos (2017, p. 4088), "the emphasis on the diversity of the workforce has been increasingly discussed and required to respond to a change in globalized culture", although it seems to be related mainly to a business discourse issue (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009).

It is worth outlining, at this point, our understanding or diversity aligned to what was proposed by Ferreira (2012):

has the conceptual sense of social, ethnic and gender segments, among others, that, regardless of quantity, have little social, political and economic representation (insertion in the job market, occupation of positions of power and others) and has as historical equivalents the expressions "minorities", "minority groups" or "minorised groups". (Ferreira, 2012).

Thus, we understand "diversity management" as a set of management practices intending, in a certain way, equal access to work. The concept is related to the identity of the groups that constitute the organizations, to the recognition of the minority groups in this context and to the social and corporate history of these groups (Alves & Galeão-Silva, 2004).

In this paper, we present the results of the qualitative research conducted between August and November 2017 on Diversity Management in Brazilian companies. Starting from a group of Brazil's 20 largest corporations by revenue (Forbes, 2016),

we sought to map the perception of employees and managers about Diversity in the context of these organizations, to confront the corporate discourse with the perspective of professionals who identify themselves with the theme.

From a qualitative perspective, the research extends the understanding, in an interdisciplinary way, of the concept of Diversity within Brazilian organizations, perceiving it both as a cause and as a symptom of contemporary social behavior. We chose Brazilian companies since it is well known that almost all existing studies are, in addition to quantitative, based only on the experience of multinational companies.

This analysis is relevant not only to the theoretical and academic field but also - if not mainly - to the practice and the experience of individuals immersed in a formal or informal market logic. The results have been split into six, to be disclosed in this paper. Before that, we believe a brief theoretical contextualization of the subject, from a bibliographic review, is necessary.

Diversity Management

Diversity is a concept with vague outlines. There is not even a theoretical consensus. The subject reverberates in scientific productions in the fields of communication, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and administration. However, it is in the area of administration that the subject gains more defined management contours, in the context of organizations.

To Alves and Galeão-Silva (2004), the technical rationality, a trait of the consolidation of capitalism, gave way to technocratic ideology, "which is expressed through the attempt to portray the administration of companies as a neutral function, based on a modern scientificity that has expert and technical managers with influence and responsibilities" (p.25).

This belief, however, tends to lead organizations to adopt an attitude of homogenization, as described by Saraiva and Irigaray (2009).

[Organizations] deal with their employees as if their differences could disappear under the formality of hierarchy. In a certain way, it is assumed that individuals can separate their personal traits and interests from their professional ones, subjecting the former to the latter within an organizational environment (p. 339).

But it is also from this perspective, that diversity begins to gain space in academic production, reflecting the context of US organizations. First, from the 1980s, "various studies on workforce diversity started, questioning the hegemonic view that individual differences had little influence on an organization's environment and results" (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009, p. 339). In 1990, Harvard Business Review published the first relevant work using the term "diversity management", by R. Roosevelt Thomas, which advocated that companies start facing this issue in a way to replace, in the organizational context, public policies of affirmative action avoiding setbacks to the principle of meritocracy (Alves & Galeão-Silva, 2004).

For Coelho Jr. (2015), diversity management happens as a discursive practice related to a desire of organizations to align themselves with an emerging social demand, and as a way to reinforce the legitimacy of the current capitalist model. To him, this movement is strongly related to globalization, which has transformed business culture.

One of the characteristics of this transnational business culture, which works as an ideological framework of the business world, is the search for translating the contemporary sociopolitical agenda regarding managerial technology. Among the examples of managerial technologies originated in this movement are, according to him, the management of diversity: a response from the business world to the social changes articulated around the right to difference, such as the black movement, women's movement and the LGBT movement (Coelho Jr., 2015, p. 81).

Therefore, production in the academic-scientific area during the 1990s and 2000s has come to account for justifying, in a technocratic way, the benefits of diversity from a management point of view, not to the social demands per se. In Brazil, Maria Tereza Leme Fleury, from the Economics and Business School at USP was the first researcher on the theme, and her production, according to Coelho Jr (2015), reinforces and validates "the pragmatic, schematic and triumphalist logic of this managerial technology specific to the transnational business culture, which [...] has the mission to neutralize the challenging potential of multicultural movements, transforming them into something palatable to organizations" (p. 84).

Fleury's academic production was an essential first step to put the issue on the agenda of Brazilian society, more specifically, of the corporate environment. With her article "Gerenciando a diversidade cultural: experiências de empresas brasileiras" (freely translated as "Managing cultural diversity: experiences from Brazilian companies"), published

by Revista de Administração de Empresas from Fundação Getúlio Vargas (Fleury, 2000), the topic also begins to gain relevance among journalists covering the corporate environment, along with business consultants and even the think tanks funded by organizations, such as Instituto Ethos (Coelho Jr., 2015).

Thus, a discursive construction on Diversity in the context of organizations arises, supported by the academic production, media, consultancies and business entities, helping the subject to gain relevance. It is also important to note, however, that the discursive construction, by itself, is not enough to transform reality within organizations. Neither are independent policies and norms capable of promoting real changes in the practice of companies since any practice is aligned to the organizational culture, which, in turn, is constituted and reconstituted on the actual experience of the employee.

A true collection of learning, organizational culture influences the way how employees react to demands from both internal and external environments and "is an informal and shared way of perceiving life and participation within the organization, keeping its members together and influencing what they think of themselves and their work" (Carramenha, Cappellano, & Mansi, 2013). Thus, beyond management aspects, diversity is firmly connected to each organization's - unique - cultural context and, therefore, depends on the learning that constitutes the fabric that forms the identity of the organization.

Therefore, understanding Diversity Management requires, necessarily, an understanding of how inclusion – effectively – happens within organizations. On the other hand, inclusion refers to subjective aspects that are related to the perception of the employees' experience, not to numbers, which are recurrent when illustrating the good performance of Management (whether related to Diversity or not).

Methodology

The main motivation for this work was to understand what is behind the numbers illustrating the management (or lack thereof) of diversity in organizations. For this to be possible, only a qualitative research technique would assure us of this deeper understanding, since it allows us to "explore the spectrum of opinions, the different representations on the subject in question" (Gaskell, 2011, p. 68).

For this research, we reached out to diagnosis based on Corporate Listening, proprietary method of consultancy firm 4CO, which follows the principles of multiple methods, customized and refined for the corporate environment. Nevertheless, this method is not limited to a single and rigid flow, in order to account for the complex cultural and social context of organizations.

The research is based on a methodology that started with the exploration of secondary data to outline our initial scenario. Vast desk research on all themes related to Diversity in the corporative context helped to identify previously conducted researches and press articles on the topic. This phase allowed us to properly delimit the research objective, as being the mapping of employees' and managers' perception of Diversity within the corporate context.

To promote a large cutout of Brazilian companies, we chose not to segment our research by type of economic activity or by the market. Thus, the universe of the corporations surveyed was selected according to the economic aspect: the 20 largest companies by revenue in the year 2016, according to Forbes magazine (The World's Biggest Public Companies, 2016).

After correctly qualifying the universe of the research, a cut line was elaborated for the definition of the sample field. Therefore, we chose to limit our universe using the technique of interest. Thus, among the 20 companies of our universe, our defined sample was:

- 15 managers linked to our theme, regardless of their hierarchical level, who acted as official representatives of Diversity in their organizations;
- 45 employees identified in any of the Diversity-related groups.
- It is worth mentioning that the defined sample was 100% achieved, with following highlights:
- Out of the 20 companies of this universe, 16 answered officially on their participation through managers in charge of this theme. Of those, 12 companies were interviewed for the research and four declined formally, stating lack of interest or having nothing to declare on the subject.

- Of the 45 employees interviewed, we spoke with at least one of each of the 20 participating companies and with a maximum of three employees of the same corporation.

The following steps involved the definition of a work schedule, the elaboration of the exploratory field itinerary, the script test and the invitation to the participants, which, in the case of the first group, of professional managers of the theme, was made directly by e-mail. Employees were invited in two distinct ways: a) through the researcher's network, which was later expanded using the "snowball" technique to reach all other respondents; and b) through direct approach, made by sending private messages via LinkedIn.

The research was conducted through in-depth individual interviews, in person or by phone, according to the availability of each respondent. Each session lasted around 45 minutes, according to the evolution of the participants. The survey included professionals from Brazil's Northeast, Midwest, Southeast and South regions.

Results

The results have been split into six main findings, quickly described as follows. Each finding has the potential for scientific exploration in different articles, a task that we intend to develop over time, to confront the results with different theoretical repertoires in more depth.

Finding #1: Diversity matters, but is not relevant

Corporations are not isolated from the social milieus in which they are immersed (Kunsch, 2003). Therefore, as a result of the pulsating and recurring manifestations of social collectives, companies have been more attentive to the theme of Diversity.

As I see it, Diversity is still at a very early stage. I work at a company where they recently established a board. I feel that over the last year they have been looking at this subject from an institutional stand. When it comes to practice, it's really tough. As I see it, there is still a long way to go. Maybe because it's all very recent. When it comes to practice, I notice that there is still bias, though subtle. Also, all discussions regarding Diversity are still "enveloped" in the cause of women. I don't know if this is a first step, but it's our current scenario.

The interviewees, both employees, and managers of the theme perceive this as an important agenda in Brazilian society, some of them attach this phenomenon to the higher visibility promoted by social media, however, within the work environment, we see some timid steps towards an inevitable transformation driven by the social context.

Thus, it is possible to say that this is an important subject for companies, even if they are yet not ready to deal with it, as one manager says.

We have no formal committees yet. When we want to address this theme, we seek for partners in other areas. There are no formal structures; it depends on our needs. It's all being studied, right now this theme is in the spotlight (...) I believe I'll have more to share in a year.

Based on this understanding about the intimate relationship and influence of the social context on companies and vice versa, it is possible to identify a few interviewees who present statements contrary to the advance of this discussion within organizations.

There is a strong feeling that Diversity is not very relevant. By understanding this perception of the interviewees, it is easy to infer something most of them signaled during the interviews: Diversity, at least today, is just a fad in companies.

I see this as a fad, you know? Like, the company is thinking: 'everybody else is doing it, and we're not?' I believe that many have taken on this quest for Diversity because they had no other option.

When it comes to addressing this subject, Brazilian corporations are still taking their first steps, which is only reinforced by the fact that only a few companies have areas dedicated to it. To stem their latent evolutionary needs, Brazilian organizations rely on references and benchmarks from multinationals to reach a turning point that never happens.

Finding #2: An empty speech, a poor experience

The structural complexity of organizations, which are permeated by a particular view of the world and by a unique set of rules, rites, and assumptions (Schein, 2001) hinders the sedimentation of new initiatives and favors the misalignment of discourse with corporate practice. This is exactly what happens when it comes to Diversity Management, according to our research results. Managers of the theme show keen interest in implementing initiatives to promote diversity in their companies, however, only a few have been able to demonstrate such practices that are already in progress. In most cases, there are no internal policies formalizing the subject, which contributes to it being conducted procedurally and simplistically. "We don't have any specific actions, but we are uploading articles and discussions on this subject on our internal blogs. And it never evolves, it's just stuck there", reveals one of the theme managers.

All this corroborates the understanding that these efforts are, therefore, little noticed by employees. "After seven months in the company, I only saw a poster with Diversity written on it once. I guess it must be some kind of program, but I'm not sure", says and employee. Once in a while, employees are impacted by superficial communication initiatives or occasional and generalist approaches that do not stimulate critical reflection on the subject. All this dense texture breaks with the general perception that there is no lasting and long-term perspective on this subject within the companies.

I think it's just a complete lack of will to put it into practice, you know? Unfortunately, I believe it's all just talk. Just like environmental responsibility. It's only to improve the company's results. So the client has a better impression of the company. I think they just don't want to offer opportunities, to see people for their skills. I believe they don't want to face this in a fair way.

Add to this the strong perception of employees that the barriers to diversity are set from the doorway up to the admittedly flawed systems of promotion. According to the interviewees, the selective processes give preference to the normative and tend to suppress the dissonant (diversity in the workplace happens, mostly, by operation of law, in case of the mandatory inclusion of people with disabilities in companies). The organizational environment is considered by the interviewees as being selective, segregationist and restrictive. A place that avoids the entrance of diversity and that curbs individual manifestations and expressions.

Finding #3: There is Diversity, but it is waiting to be embraced

Organizations are influenced by their environment (Sriramesh, 2009), therefore, the existence of Diversity in its many representations is natural, since we are a diverse country. However, despite the miscegenation of Brazilian society, there is a historical prejudice that is rooted and spread throughout our culture. According to our interviewees, both traits directly affect the way organizations face and conduct their debates on Diversity. In other words, there is Diversity in the companies, even if just a little, the problem is that there is no representative space for it. This lack of representativeness manifests itself in objective questions, such as in "I work in an office that has 150 people, and only has one black person", but also manifests itself in subjective issues, which trigger a systemic social discrimination, in which the rule is to find the employee carrying some Diversity feature limited to lower positions. "We do have people with disabilities, but they always hold jobs in back-office positions. We meet our quota, and that's about it", says a theme manager.

Banned from leading positions, the one who differs becomes an increasingly rare person as we go up the hierarchy ladder. And because this employee does not become a role model, the segregation scenario is fed back.

Gay people face barriers on their way up, but they get promoted. When it comes to people being openly gay, I think it's not very likely that they will get promoted. I've only ever heard of one gay person who got it that far.

As a symptom, as much as someone diverse is hired, they immediately risk being rejected by the organizational culture (deliberately or not). "Many years passed before I was promoted, they always preferred the girls. 'Let's just leave the transsexual working where she is; she'll quit soon enough'". Another statement, now from a gay employee, who said he could not show any effeminate mannerisms, reflects the normative power of culture. "We tolerate [difference], but don't come rub it in our face or we'll find a way to get rid of you."

It was also noted that it is not uncommon for interviewees to identify themselves with a group of Diversity and to adopt a stance contrary to the theme, for fear of inciting corridor conversations, prejudice or retaliation. It is part of their survival strategy to swallow hard, accept prejudice and intolerance, and not speak up or ask for help, since - because there is no trust in the formal channels of denunciation - there is a risk that the victim will be undermined and discredited.

Finding #4: With constant prejudice, tolerance is confused with inclusion

Although subtle in organizations, interviewees report that it is common to be confronted with judgments based on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, apparent disability, and other nuances, whether while selecting, assessing or dismissing an employee - or simply while coexisting with the difference.

Nowadays, it is rarely blatant. People are more subtle when it comes to prejudice. There is never a word of prejudice to a person's face, but there is always a discriminatory speech behind their backs.

This should cause distress or astonishment, but, with prejudice being recurrent in Brazilians' social daily lives, similar facts occurring in the corporate environment are normalized. This normality hinders the recognition of discriminatory acts and, therefore, the majority of employees had difficulty in discerning whether they had suffered prejudice at work or not. One interviewee's statement illustrates what we are trying to say. "I've heard my manager making fun of my disability many times, and she didn't realize it might affect me. She'd make fun of disabilities in general. She wasn't talking about me. I don't know if this is prejudice, but it does affect me."

Although they have experienced discriminatory, disrespectful and embarrassing situations, many try to diminish what happened. "Fourth-grade bullying is still there when it comes to gay people... it's the 'being a faggot' thing. I never say anything about my private life there, that's why I never experienced anything like it." It is therefore not surprising that employees do not know how to deal with prejudice, much less how to combat it - turning a blind eye to events that would require an attitude part of the company are evident in all reports.

Whenever confronted with harassment, I try to reach out to my manager or HR. It is so common that we often end up doing nothing because that's just the way it is. If we were to take any measures, they'd have to dismiss half the team.

Such elusive behaviors are reinforced by the organizational culture itself since it is common to sweep prejudice under the rug. Furthermore, there is a recurrent perception of the interviewees that reports and complaints about discrimination are not put forth, generating more damage and exposure to the victim than to the perpetrator. In this sense, ethics hotlines and similar channels are discredited.

There are zillions of reports of sexual harassment, bullying, vendors who don't feel respected. But I do not know how much is done. They give the guy a warning, say he can not do that, and then the guy puts a lot of effort in trying to find out who reported him rather than changing his behavior and manages to get the other person fired.

All this keeps the employees from believing that problems like this can be solved. Leaving things as they are is the safest solution when ones' very own job is at stake. This overview leads to the understanding that Diversity is not embraced; only tolerated.

Finding #5: Oblivious, absent and sarcastic leadership

When it comes to diversity, the importance of the leader in the organizational context becomes clear (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009). To almost all topic managers that were interviewed, it is clear that when leadership is involved and engages with the issues of Diversity, the theme gains relevance within the organization. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that the theme needs a relevant sponsor to be put into practice.

If they had high-level leaders who truly cared about Diversity, this could be a top-down policy. Here in the company leadership has no interest in it, they are retrograde and follow a pattern. An uncommitted leadership, which follows a pattern and does not see the impact of it in the end.

For the majority of the participants, the top leaderships does not show any interest in prioritizing issues related to Diversity. "It does not seem to me that Diversity is a priority issue for our leadership."

It's a similar scenario from the perspective of employees, with more emphasis on the behavior of middle managers. According to them, leaders are usually oblivious to the theme and absent of all related discussions. Besides, they show difficulty in developing concrete action with their teams.

[Due to my disability] I need a particular computer screen. My manager took a very long time to figure this out. One day, she saw me reading very close to the screen and said, 'Jeez, what are you doing?' She knew I had a disability, because of my position, but she didn't realize it because my disability is not so apparent. But, if you know that a person has a disability, you know she has special needs.

There is one interesting point about leaders that deserves to be highlighted. It is evident in the interviewees' statements that leaders do not directly incite prejudice, but they do not take a stand when witnessing intolerance. Reports of leaders who joke about in their day-to-day are not uncommon, and therefore they are not perceived as effective agents of change when it comes to this topic.

The other day I was in a meeting with my direct superior. Then she started telling a story. It wasn't really prejudicial, but I was offended. She said she was watching TV [...] and saw a scene of two women kissing. And that she had to switch channels quickly because she was afraid her kids would want to try.

In a scenario where no one takes responsibility, Diversity becomes an easy target of gnawing indifference, favoring discomfort in interpersonal relationships, gives way to insecurity and results in a lack of dialogue, which is the main source of all taboos related to this theme within companies.

Finding #6: Diversity: how much is it worth

Companies act around a specific theme as it gains more significant social outlines and, however important an agenda becomes it has to demonstrate its direct and tangible benefits before gaining effective space in the corporate environment. The same happens with Diversity.

For both employees and managers related to this subject that have been interviewed for our research, there is a general feeling that the subject is attractive but still needs to prove financial impact before gaining relevance. According to them, what really matters at the end of the day are business indicators.

As long as senior leadership does not understand tangibly, through results, how much it loses by not embracing Diversity, it will not dwell on that agenda. Companies always work with priorities, as long as this is not a priority, it will not be treated as it should. Even if it's just a fad.

The counterpoint, however, is signaled by one of the interviewed managers. "The problem of companies is to see and understand that it's not always about results. There are people. People generate results. It's not results that generate people. We need an open discussion on how to treat these people."

The technocratic approach, however, is the one that has been gaining space within organizations (Alves & Galeão-Silva, 2004). And since Diversity is a complex and somewhat intangible subject, measurement becomes difficult to implement - something that can be aggravated by the lack of clarity related to the subject, as described in Finding #1.

A few managers of the subject who were interviewed reported dribbling this scenario when working on the issue of Diversity "from the outside". In other words, they got some attention on Diversity after demonstrating the importance of the theme to consumers or clients, highlighting the financial improvements this would bring to the business. According to these interviewees, the company understands that the client is diverse and that it is important to understand them in their plurality, but, as for the employee, a posture of denial and indifference is maintained, as mentioned by one interviewee: "Marketing does lots of videos and talks about diversity to the external public. These videos focus a public that is different from ours, but it was only for YouTube. But once through the door, there is absolutely no space for it."

This posture not only proves the company's immaturity in the face of Diversity. It ignores a critical point in the PR and communication strategy of any business: understanding that publics are multivalent, occupying multiple places in an organization's relationship ecosystem (França, 2009). It is not uncommon to note that the consumer and the employee are often the same person and part of the same society. Moreover, this narrow perspective on the theme disregards other relevant aspects, such as human dignity involved in this process.

Final Considerations

Since the corporate environment is not isolated from social context, the relevance of Diversity to contemporary companies is evident. Just like the social behavior, Diversity is still taboo in most researched companies. A sad truth about the cultural logic of organizations that avoid addressing difficult issues that could destabilize previous historical-normative outlines.

If Organizational Culture is the *locus* of group behavior, it is urgent to evaluate the way organizations are managing it, to make such a semantic space effectively permeable to diversity in all its aspects. Thus, it is possible to conjecture that being a diverse company needs much more than only fostering tolerance. It is imperative to indeed accept and include the

multiplicity of all forms, building on a daily basis an environment in which employees live with the plural and feel safe in establishing long-lasting and trusting relationships.

There is no space left for dull answers to the question "why work with Diversity in our business?". After all, it is not just an increase in financial results, but rather a fulfillment of their concrete social role and, also, of the symbolic seat of organizations in the collective imagination.

Conducting this research enabled us to successfully achieve the initially proposed goal of mapping of employees' and managers' perception of Diversity within the corporate context. We understand that the findings, in the way they were organized, deliver - albeit in a succinct way, in the space that fits us in this work - a response to the objective, a response that opens space for new dives in the results, with a view to other possible problematizations.

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