Autoethnographic reflection in action: the establishment and abolishment of a global diversity position in a large organization

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Abstract

Autoethnography is purposefully subjective and emotional, and offers thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences. In the present paper, I use an autoethnographic approach to present a narrative of change towards the formal establishment and abolishment of a Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) position in the talent management department of a Dutch multinational company. By doing so, I address a conceptual dilemma between exclusive talent management and the inclusive nature of diversity management: if talent management is purposefully exclusive in terms of talent identification and development, how can organizations achieve diversity and inclusion at all organizational levels? How is this dilemma manifested in the organizational structure in a company, and to what extent can it be changed?

To analyze this dilemma, I present four vignettes, which I experienced between the time period of April 2012 and November 2013. They depict the development from initially not combining diversity and talent management (vignette 1) towards a formal integration (vignettes 2 and 3) and finally, the abolishment of the newly established diversity position (vignette 4).

Vignette one highlights a lunch conversation with the new director of the global personnel development department, who was also responsible for the talent management division. In this conversation, I suggested adding a D&I stream to a new talent management initiative. While the director was interested in understanding the connection between talent management and D&I, he concluded that D&I could not be integrated to the current talent management initiative.

Vignette two illustrates a situation during a meeting with the Chief HR officer (CHRO) and his direct reports. During this meeting he informed his team about his decision to include a new D&I initiative under the talent management division. When explaining his decision, the CHRO highlighted his awareness that this was a top down decision, not because his social orientation, but because the megatrends from the outside world forced the organization to do so. A few weeks later, a new position focusing on D&I was established in the talent management team, which was offered to me.
In vignette three I present a conversation with an HR senior manager, talking about my new D&I position and potential deliverables in the first three months. The senior manager advised me to compare my role with a conductor in an orchestra. Rather than playing all instruments, I should instead compile an overview of the future trends the company will be facing, and propose initial suggestions how these challenges could be met. In the short term, this suggestion emphasized the need to present a compelling business case in order to receive the mandate to continue the efforts towards inclusion of all employees in the organization.

In the forth and final vignette I depict that the lack of top management support in combination with declining company performance led to the abolishment of my diversity position. I describe two situations in which my direct manager informs me about the decisions to stop with the global D&I initiative, and the advice I receive from another manager to move on and to stay positive.

The connecting element of all vignettes is my attempt to combine the arenas of diversity management and talent management, and the various reactions I receive from the outside environment, either through direct interactions, or as consequence of the shifts in the wider organizational context. Thus, the vignettes provide the base for personal and organizational levels of analysis. On a personal level, I reflect on my own positioning in the organization in an attempt to understand its impact on the described changes. On the organizational level, I provide an analysis of various dynamics and power relations in decision-making processes and link this back to the strategic human resources management literature.

This paper contributes to the dynamic body of autoethnographic writing, and especially to the symposium theme ‘Reflection in Action’. My personal reflection of the complex and ambiguous nature of my positioning in the organizational context provides a unique perspective on change mechanisms in the described organization. Furthermore, this paper expands existing qualitative research on talent and diversity management, in the current absence of strong theoretical positions. My aim is to contribute to the understanding and application of global talent management in large organizations and its integration with the D&I domain by using and autoethnographic approach. This way, I respond to the call for an increased need of empirical investigations of diversity in organizational settings in order to shed light on multi-layered forms of resistance and lack of coherence between talent management and D&I in organizations.

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