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DISADVANTAGED GROUPS OF EMPLOYEES

Another field where the integration of career guidance and counselling into human resource development could be beneficial is by focusing of hitherto disadvantaged groups. Some larger corporations are moving into that direction, partly out of considerations of corporate social responsibility and partly to improve corporate performance by accessing underused human resources. To further such inclusion should be part of our professional ethos, especially also when working with smaller organisations that do not have the resources for a highly specialised HRD department.

Study after study shows that we still have unequal opportunities for women, for Black people and people of colour, for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, for people who missed out on educational opportunities because of their social class, for religious and ethnic minorities, and for people with disabilities. Most workplaces are anything but truly diverse. The individual personal development of many people is hampered by experiences of disadvantage and discrimination. Each individual experience is different, resulting from of personal life stories and collective histories, in which they are entangled. For example, a Black autistic may not only experience the various difficulties that Black people and autists encounter in the workplace, but may, for example, encounter racialized stereotypes not recognising him as genuinely autistic. A transgender member of a religious minority may not only be up against discrimination in the workplace against both her religious and sexual identity, but may also have to deal with rejection in her religious community.

But why should that concern career counsellors and human resource developers? There are two good reasons – which are both equally important: **social justice** and **business sense**.

Inequality of opportunity means that people, for various reasons, cannot develop their full potential. This affects their economic situation, their general well-being and health, their self-esteem and their ability to participate in decision-making processes. As a consequence, members of affected populations and communities are also underrepresented among decision makers. Their voices will be less heard and acknowledged. In democratic societies, such disadvantage is not acceptable. It is for this reason, that the aim of workplace inclusion is enshrined in equal opportunity and anti-discrimination laws in most democratic countries.

While we need to be aiming for better career opportunities for all for reasons of good citizenship and social responsibility alone, there is also an economic incentive. Companies which fail to develop



all human potential are putting themselves at a disadvantage – there is a **business case** as well as one for social justice.

If employees, for whatever reason, are not able to develop their full potential, this is detrimental to business, because organisations and societies cannot make the best use of their human resources. Facing the challenges of digitalisation, demographic change, and generally growing uncertainty, leaving human resources un-developed makes even less economic sense today than ever before. Companies are beginning to realise that they cannot afford to miss out on talent because they underrate the potential of employees because of engrained racial and sexist stereotypes, or because they fail to make the workplace accessible and liveable for people with disability, or fail to make their organisation a safe space for LGTB+ people, or are not prepared to invest in people who for whatever reasons missed out on training and education in the past. The list goes on.

A word of warning: It is tempting to be satisfied with the validity of the business case alone. That's the core concern of management, after all. You will nonetheless need to be committed to the social-justice case! Why? Because only by such commitment equal opportunities can be pursued with the necessary energy. And because only in this way it will be pursued in an authentic way. Employees will notice if you're only in it for the money and may turn to employers who are serious about diversity and equality. Mere focus on the business case also would mean that we focus on those groups for whom inclusion appears most easy – not to mention the pitfall of tokenism.

In order to support the goal of equal opportunities most effectively and develop human resources most efficiently, we need to be able to observe and question our own attitudes and routines – and we need to adjust our professional practice to the needs of diverse clients. We need to be critical-reflective practitioners and we need to be attentive counsellors. What does this mean?

Critical-reflective practice responds to the fact that in order to understand individuals we need to understand the difference in collective experiences as well! The problem is not just that, if we do not share backgrounds, we do not have direct access to the experiences of others. The problem is that our own background and our professional routines also bias the way we see others, the assumptions we make about them and the potentials we recognise or fail to recognise in them. We always should do this, but especially when working with people who experience disadvantage and discrimination we have to:

- Reflect on how our own background impacts on your reception and response to people with other backgrounds
- Constantly inquire and learn in cooperation than to have fixed knowledges about specific groups

Ideally, we do this in supervision groups involving a diverse group of professionals. A good start would also be to keep a reflective diary.

On the basis of such critical reflection we do not only need to adjust our perception, but also our practice. We need to engage in **attentive counselling**. This means adjusting to the specific individual and collective needs of the client. It means reversing the habit of expecting clients to fit into the counselling and educational setting available (and at best helping them to do so). Instead, we work on the assumption that people normally have reasons for the way they act, respond, or are inactive and irresponsible. For example, employees from a working class background may have a history of humiliating experiences with classroom settings and with being questioned by middle-class people in pinstripe. We need to modify our own approach so as to appropriately attend to the target group's need (instead of expecting them to accept ours). In our example this can mean setting up counselling opportunities on the shop floor during night shifts, or to rethink "training" so that it connects to the ways of learning people successfully brought to bear outside the classroom. To find the right approach, it is always a good idea to engage in consultation and, crucially, get members of our target group on board the process of planning and implementation.

This can be challenging, of course, as it constitutes a move outside our comfort zones. This is particularly the case when we are not just working with individuals, but with employees in organisations. But it is here where we need to be if we want to make a difference. To be successful in this context, the first issue is to actually get in. **Access** can be a problem as career counselling for disadvantaged employees. Especially smaller firms may be reluctant to invest in CGC. So it will be necessary to package the concern with other services – consulting for employer branding, change management, general HR consultancy etc. And it will be necessary to relate to and connect with core concerns of the organisation in question. A business case needs to be made – but it needs to be as concrete as possible and tailored to where the company is and where it wants to go. And it may help to realise the innovative potential of widened participation. That is: do not just ask how inclusion and diversity can be accommodated, but how it will bring the organisation forward.

Once aboard, the task of the career professional will be broader than in traditional career counselling. It will involve **getting involved**. That is, conflicts of interests will need to be communicated and negotiated – how can individual capabilities and aspirations be realised within the constraints of organisational constraints, interests, targets etc.? These negotiations can no

longer be simply delegated by advising the client – the counsellor may need to get negotiate with management and employees in person, become part of the conversation between employer and employee while maintaining professional independence. Where employees need and request it, counsellor may act as allies and advocates vis-à-vis management. And they should communicate the value of representation and involvement at any time.