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Growing business through diversity

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I AM convinced that diversity, if seen as a powerful tool and harnessed properly to serve the business purpose, can be an asset contributing to positive business growth, motivation and customer satisfaction.

Diversity should not only have a pigmentation perspective but should also look at diversity in terms of aspects such as skills, background, experience, age, orientation and qualifications. Companies should aim for a broad spectrum with varying backgrounds lending to appropriate expertise. Leadership, particularly at board level, is most certainly important and the driver of change.

That transformation starts at the top. Creating awareness internally, making policies turn into reality and become a living part of the business fibre, are essential for success. It is necessary for all to be sensitive to the ultimate goal of gender parity and fairness.

Getting the right people in the business is driven through the talent management strategy and led visibly by the actions and "speak" of the executive leadership team.

In turn, communication to the next business level drives understanding, shared meaning and the extension of the process through the business echelons.

The talent acquisition process must be geared to finding the right skills, attitude and competencies within the desired demographic framework.

Don't forget about people with disabilities, who need to make up part of the work force. The acceptance that transformation is a long-term goal – not long term so as to delay implementation – but rather to achieve a structure that will live on and is not geared solely to satisfy the next BBBEE rating is essential.

Coaching, guidance and motivation are all part of the essential investment in moving a business forward to the next level.

The frustration, so often heard, that "as soon as I have trained them, I lose them", must be avoided through succession management and retention, which are key to business sustainability.

We should move away from money as the primary retention driver. A collegial and conducive work environment, stretch assignments, on the job training and work-life balance, remain important goals for many and should be facilitated in our pressured working environments.

A key learning has been the promotion of fun in the workplace – laughter is always the best medicine!

Women in particular need special consideration and flexibility to nurture their commitment to the business and to retain them. Flexibility in working arrangements can go a long way to deal with life cycle stages such as pregnancy and motherhood. Special needs can be satisfied by allowing work from home or flexibility in working hours.

This type of consideration is appreciated by the recipient, while not detracting from business performance.

But, ultimately, it is the business results that count and this is where diversity can play such a significant role. A diverse business structure aligns with a diverse customer base – it is not about a scorecard at the end of the day.

It is ultimately business success and sustainability by which the investment in transformation and diversity can be measured. You will be proud if you can say that the demographics of your company align, not just to create a scorecard, but align to reflect the business as a whole and also resonate with customer needs.

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