Word Power: Implications for Minority Managerial Candidates

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Introduction

In the corporate environment, CEOs are often rewarded on the basis of their abilities to balance human resources with the organization objectives in order to obtain performance goals. The data collected from organizations achieving these goals provide valuable benchmark indicators that may be referenced during strategic planning for implementation or improvement of organizational objectives. It is critical for organizations to utilize these indicators given changes such as: global competition, workforce demographics and rapid technological advancements. It is paradoxical when these indicators become organizational barriers. For example, diversity initiatives are often perceived as difficult to measure with respect to financial impact. Most discussions focusing on employees' satisfaction suggest perceived respect will increase the probability that an employee will remain with the organization, thus, increasing their productivity (Kochan, et al, 2003). There is a great deal of disagreement with the aforementioned findings. Primarily, disagreement exists due to the varying degrees of measurement and/or definitions used by organizations to implement diversity initiatives.

Diversity literature suggests training programs are short term whereas education and development involves a long term comprehensive approach (Bohlander & Snell, 2004). Proponents of diversity training programs contend that understanding the importance of a diverse workforce creates productive environments in which everyone feels valued, where their talents are used and organizational objectives are met. Critics contend that there is not enough evidence to adequately measure whether implementation of diversity training programs increase organizational financial success (Cascio, 2003).

Subsequently, education and development, given the transition from classic management to learning organizations, have become a more acceptable approach for diversity initiatives (Adler, 2002). This broad approach can be modified to specific needs of the organization. An often cited organizational need in the current workforce is providing educational and development activities necessary for members of specific groups to do their job and have the opportunity for advancement (Chen, et al., 2004). One example proponents use to support this approach is a study that projected an increase of women across multiple global workforces as it relates to the current talent pool of women in nontraditional leadership positions (Beck,1999; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). The changing workforce creates opportunities for competitive advantages by utilizing a broad approach to diversity initiatives. With this in mind, we identified some specific business

communication skills which candidates need for entry-level management according to criteria of US companies.

Business Communication Skills

After review of related literature and open-ended interviews with 10 diversity experts chosen for their experience working with organizations on diversity initiatives four skills were identified: self confidence, use of oral presentation, effective team member, and utilize feedback. The skills should be integrated with the organization's education and development with respect to diversity initiatives. The open-end interviews were advantageous to this exploratory study because it allowed flexibility to probe and follow up on responses. A structured professional and friendly tone was maintained in order to provide a level of comfort; in which selected diversity experts were apt to speak freely about a sensitive subject.

Findings indicated diversity experts in this study focused on productivity and remaining competitive. These findings mirror leadership literature that focuses characteristics identified as important for leadership of diverse organizations. Examples include: an openness to change oneself, mentoring and empowerment of diverse employees, a long range and personal vision that recognizes and supports a diverse organizational community (Chemers & Ayman, 1993; Richard, 2000; Wells, 2001).

A questionnaire was developed that incorporated emerging skills. Theoretical frameworks were used to formulate working definitions of identified skills as follow.

> *Self confidence*, able to inspire employees to change by exhibiting behavior that reflects confidence in what one is doing.
> *Use of oral presentation*, able to communicate effectively.
> *Effective team member*, able to promote others to work together.
> *Utilize feedback*, able to develop others by making available resources that help improves skills.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine whether and how minority female management candidates are perceived differently on their evaluation and promotion given mastery of specific business communication skills. The questionnaire was designed to collect data concerning respondents′ views on merit and preferential hiring in general.

Findings and Implications

Participants in this study included 25 minority female management candidates tracked for traditional male leadership positions. Minorities were defined as African-American, Hispanic-American and Asian-American. In terms of sampling of organization types, candidates were from oil and gas, service, banking and finance. The research method in this exploratory study was a questionnaire developed from opened ended interviews with diversity experts from the same organization types as the candidates. Collected data was

used to construct a broader questionnaire that can be used for statistical analysis with regard to specific business communication skills.

The study's limitation is recognized due to findings that focus on soft skills. The aforementioned are skills that are non technical, abilities and traits. They include competencies such as: problem-solving skills, oral communication skills, personal qualities and work ethic, and interpersonal and teamwork skills. All of which can be partially defined by culture and subsequently assess of factors associated with stereotyping. For example, a major finding of this study is the self- perception that male counterparts believe female managers lack self confidence. These findings contradict literature focusing on leadership style. Women managers are stereotyped to use a transformational style which develop followers into leaders and bring about significant change, rather than transactional, an exchange process between leader and followers (Pounder & Coleman, 2002).

However, these findings are supported by the following data from the US Department of Labor:

- Minorities (Blacks, Hispanics and Asians), make up 15.5 percent of the total workforce, but occupy only 6 percent of management positions;
- Women make up 37.9 percent of the total workforce, but only occupy 16.9 percent of management positions; and
- At the executive level, only 3.6 percent are minority, and 6.6 percent are women (Statistics - Break the Glass Ceiling Foundation, 2003-2004).

Another major finding was minority female management candidates are perceived differently on their evaluation and promotion although perceived as effective communicators, team members and utilize feedback. Data indicated respondents' underlying perception focused on preferential hiring rather than merit. In general the respondent perceived that merit advancement would lessen the perception that they could not compete, thus required special considerations given their dual (women and minority) membership status during evaluation and promotion considerations.

Arguably, these findings provide significant insight with regards to developing a broader questionnaire. Further research could identify factors that focus on merit rather than preferential hiring as it relates to artificial barriers to equal access opportunity for underrepresented populations, specifically women of color, in management positions. Findings from this study contradicted related literature on women's management styles, which is centered on communication and building positive relationships. Interestingly, these results indicated respondents did not visualize themselves, perhaps due to the glass ceiling effect, in leadership roles. Given these findings, we believe additional research about the implication for *Word Power for Minority Managerial Candidates* can provide data that could contribute to implementation of hiring processes designed to enhance our workforce talent pool and productivity.

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Biographies

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