

Manage diversity – the DAKOTA vision

What has the livelihood system of the Dakota to do with our cooperation systems?

When comparing the Dakota livelihood system and organisational systems, we focus on three key issues:

(i) Diversity

The Dakota way

As plain Indians, in each of the four seasons, spring, summer, autumn, winter, the Dakota had to face different challenges that required different kinds of skills.

To be able to survive in this constantly changing environment, the Dakota fostered a culture of diversity, where every member of the tribe had a different set of skills the community could rely on at different times of the year.

The Dakota realised that it is very unlikely that all the competencies needed for the survival of the tribe were to be found in only one person, no matter how brilliant s/he might be. They recognized the need for and therefore the value of people with different competences that can complement each other in various forms and settings. This diversity of competences made the tribe flexible and prepared for change.

What do we draw from it as an organisation?

- As an organisation, we live in a changing environment as well. What works today might not work tomorrow, competence patterns that are important in one project might be unimportant in another one. Every project or programme is asking for a different set of skills and competences. One size fits all – solutions are the exception, tailor-made solutions based on specific knowledge the rule.
- Success in a dynamic environment is based on the flexibility of an organisation to respond to new or changed demands. This flexibility can only be achieved through a diversity and most important, complementarity of skills and competences of the people involved.

(ii) Mutual trust (competence vs. position)

The Dakota way

The Dakota realised, that when facing different challenges (seasons), different people have to take the lead. It was crucial for survival that the ones did the job which disposed of the best set of skills for the particular situation and not the ones which were holding the best position within the tribal structure.

This system of 'context-based hierarchies' was only possible because there was mutual trust in each other's skills and competences. The Dakota recognized that one can only lead effectively and efficiently if he's trusted by the others and given the ownership for this specific task.

In other words, the Dakota formed context-based internal networks for the different seasons, whereby the hierarchy changed from season to season, always matching the changing demand.

What do we draw from it as an organisation?

The presence of people with different competences does not guarantee organisational flexibility. The management structures have to match the diversity of competences by enabling a competence-based approach.

Hierarchies should be context-based, giving the person the lead, which disposes of the highest expert power in the specific issue. However, this horizontal approach to managing organisations can only work

- a) if we trust each other's skills and competences,
- b) if we accept that everyone has different skills and competences that should complement and not compete with each other, and
- c) if the people that have the required skills and competences get the responsibility / accountability and ownership of a specific task/project.

Ideally, the organisation should be a dynamic network of people with different competences that form new (in)formal networks to fit specific tasks. (Structured informality)

(iii) Management of limited resources

The Dakota way

The Dakota lived a nomadic lifestyle in complete isolation. There was only themselves, the members of the Lakota tribe, to rely on. No external assistance could be called in when facing challenges like droughts, floods, bushfires, diseases, attacks by other tribes, etc.

In the daily struggle for survival in the harsh conditions of the North-American plains, they could only survive if they relied on each other and allocated their limited personal and material resources in the most effective and efficient way.

The fact that they were completely self-reliable made them acknowledge that everyone has the possibility to contribute something to the community, it is just a matter of looking for it and accepting that there are different kinds of contribution. On the one side there are explicit contributions (e.g. hunting, building, fighting, etc.), but on the other side there is a whole range of implicit, not tangible, sometimes even very unconventional contributions (e.g. making people laugh, motivate people, imitate people to make them reflect on themselves, etc.). The Dakota realised that both kinds of contributions were equally important to the community, because they complement each other.

Dakota were always looking at the big picture and therefore recognized the importance of the contribution and personality of each member of the tribe. This holistic view enabled them to survive in harsh conditions with the limited resources they had.

What do we draw from it as an organisation?

- As an organisation (particularly as one with very limited resources), the management of material and personal resources is a key factor for success. Hence, we have to make sure that we 1) are aware of and validate the organisation's various (sometimes hidden) resources, and 2) allocate them in the most efficient way.
- As organisations are living systems, success - as well as failure - hardly ever depends on one single factor or contribution. We, therefore, should acknowledge that every member of the organisation contributes in his/her way to the success (or failure) of the organisational system. Things people do, might seem unimportant or out of place at first sight, but looking at the bigger picture, this "outside-the-box-thinking and -acting" might be an important asset and the organisation could benefit from it in the long run.
- If we judge people only by their tangible contributions to the organisation, we block out the informal level of activities, which is often the source of creativity and team cohesion, two major factors for success.

**The DAKOTA vision:
Validate diversity
and shape
complementarity**

