

Report: Robben Island Diversity Experience

(4 - 9 November 2001)

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59 Delegates from companies and Govt. depts. as well as International delegates participated in this experience. It was a blend of race, gender, religion and age and this contributed to enriching the diversity experience of all delegates. Some of the South African companies that participated were ABSA, Discovery Health, Durban City Council, Ehlanzeni East Municipality, First National Bank, JSE, Liberty Group, SAPS, South African Reserve Bank, Stellenbosch University, Telkom, Unisa, Wits Technikon and of course Vodacom. Government Depts represented were the Department of Agriculture and Environment, the Department of Correctional Services, the Department of Defence, the Department of Education and the Department of Health. The international delegates came from Norway, Zimbabwe and Swaziland.

The primary task of the experience was to provide opportunities for delegates to study the dynamics of diversity as it happens in the "here-and-now" i.e. on the island. The specific focus, in terms of diversity, was on the core concepts:

Relatedness

Identity

Power

Reference systems.

Relatedness explored the unconscious mutual influence between sub-groups, the illusion of sameness and their perceived similarities and differences. Identity explored all manifesting identities especially race, gender and religion. Power explored the role and effect of power in discrimination such as racism, sexism, powerlessness and dis-empowerment. Reference Systems explored the ways in which our reference systems are influenced by our worldviews, culture and race as well as individual and collective identity.

The aim of the Robben Island Diversity Experience was:

- to develop a deeper understanding of diversity and its dynamics
- to provide opportunities for learning about the core concepts.
- to provide opportunities to learn how we manage individual and collective diversity and to deal with this diversity appropriately.

To explain the RIDE (Robben Island Diversity Experience) would be very difficult if it is not personalised. The experience was the individual delegate's experience and therefore my report would be based on my experience of the RIDE.

When we arrived on the island on Sunday 4 November 2001, it was very emotional. One could not but be emotional as the bus passed the prison on our way to our living quarters for the week. We lived in the ex-prison warder's homes and this in itself was a challenge to some of the delegates. There were 5 delegates to a house and we were

racially mixed. This initially presented its own challenge as there was only one bathroom and one main bedroom and each house had to work out its own ground rules. This was the beginning of the challenge!

The opening plenary session that afternoon was indeed emotionally and psychologically challenging as delegates wrestled with the "them" and "us" i.e. the 7 consultants on one hand and the delegates on the other. Also, delegates anticipated a structured approach to this diversity experience and found to their amazement that it was a very unstructured one. It was only after the lecture on the Thursday evening, 8 November when the "Tavistock model" was unfolded and explained, that there was an understanding of the whole experience.

Throughout the experience we were divided into small groups, inter-groups, processing groups and application groups. This assisted tremendously in mixing with as diverse a group of people as possible.

We started off in 7 small groups and during these sessions we interacted with one another. As we spoke and "fleshed out" issues placed on the table, a consultant was present to assist the process. It was in the small group that most delegates felt comfortable in disclosing their attitudes, "hang ups" and boundaries and I found it a very humbling experience.

From Tuesday 6 November, after a plenary session, we could form or join any group. This was a very interesting exercise. Delegates formed groups based on a variety of reasons - age bracket, more females in the group, etc. These groups were called the "inter-groups" and each group could appoint an observer, a delegate, a negotiator and a plenipotentiary. The object of the exercise was to have group interaction. (It was later compared with the different divisions (departments) in a company.) It was amazing the amount of reluctance showed on the part of certain groups to allow "foreigners" into their territory. It was also in the inter-groups where we had the most conflict. Women delegates walked out of a group because they felt men dominated them. A White male walked out of a group, as he could not associate with what was being discussed in his group - Employment equity. A White Afrikaner female walked out of her group because a Black male was the leader.

During our group interaction and also in the plenary sessions we discussed diversity issues such as race, gender, religion, homosexuality, culture, HIV Aids, power, attitudes, Employment equity, affirmative action and the term "Black". These discussions proved that diversity exists in all organisations and that there are issues, which are not being dealt with within these organisations.

One of the challenges we faced in all groups was the reluctance of the Whites to disclose. They were quite willing to sit back and listen to others disclose, but they themselves were "closed books". However, what was fascinating was that later in the week when they disclosed, that the other groups were willing to forgive them and accept them as individuals and not as representatives of a particular group. When a White Afrikaner male disclosed his experiences in the army and also the community in which he was brought up in, there was a readiness to accept him for who he was and delegates got up and embraced him. Another interesting issue was the term "Black". There were delegates who felt that the term "Black" was exclusive to the Blacks and excluded the Coloureds and Indians. After a few days of interrogating this issue, it was accepted that whilst it was necessary in terms of Employment Equity to define Blacks as Blacks, Coloureds and Indians, it was important to see the individual (Whites included) as an individual and not representative of any particular grouping. Acceptance of Black as including Coloureds and Indians was also achieved. What also came out of this experience is that we need to stop with our "stereotypes" and accept an individual as an

individual and not hold that individual responsible for representing a particular group or for holding the individual responsible for the "sins" committed by that particular group.

The ignorance in terms of HIV Aids was frightening. To certain delegates it was taboo to engage in such a discussion. The ignorance was in the basic and fundamental understanding of HIV Aids. After personal experiences in terms of what was actually happening in certain delegates' families, there was a more sensitive approach to the topic and more "buy-in" from the delegates at large. The gender issue was a crucial issue throughout the week where in some groups, females had to fight for recognition and leadership. It seems that this is still an area in the corporate world that needs much attention. White Afrikaner females found it most difficult to accept the diversity of groups. Most of them were reduced to tears and wanted to leave the island prematurely. They could not however do so and had to confront their situation.

In my view, the main problem was that they wanted to retain power and control at all costs and constantly reminded delegates of how they function at work and at home. They wanted leadership positions in all groups and could not deal with any other race or gender being their leader. Another interesting aspect was the young Blacks. They mentioned that they were not around in 1976. They also felt that the older Black generation are abdicating their responsibility by not giving the young Blacks guidance. It is as if the older Black generation are saying that they have done their share and that it is now time for the young ones to take over. The young Blacks said that they need the input from the older Black generation. The older Black generation and particularly the ex-Robben Island prisoners, said that the political battle has been won and that it now the time to fight the economic battle - unemployment, employment equity, affirmative action, black empowerment etc.

In the processing and application groups, creative ways were put on the table as to how to deal with diversity in our respective workplaces. Suggestions and inputs were well accepted by the entire group as a whole.

Our leaving Robben Island on Friday 9 November 2001 was an emotional one and delegates exchanged business cards and contact details.

In conclusion, I would like to place on record my profound thanks for affording me the opportunity to attend this diversity experience. I have grown in terms of understanding diversity in the workplace and the impact it has on an organisation as a whole. It has also taught me to accept individuals as individuals in the here and now.

My report would be incomplete if I did not include our visit to the Maximum B Prison in which Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were incarcerated over a number of years. It was an emotional and humbling experience. There were 5 ex-Robben Island prisoners in the group and their personal stories on this "pilgrimage" coupled with the Guide's experience (who incidentally was also a former Robben Island prisoner) really moved us all. What really left an indelible impression on me was that these ex-Robben Island prisoners were so ready to forgive. I had the privilege of having one of them; Gen. Myamya from the SANDF, as my roommate and just being with him was an incredible experience. I learnt so much from him.

I would further like to add that this Diversity experience is appropriate for particularly Managers and Senior Management who are having difficulty coming to terms with diversity in all its facets.