Diversity Attitudes and Sensitivity of Employees and Leaders in the German STEM-Sector

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Abstract

The increasing diversity of cultural backgrounds shapes modern working life. On the one hand, this diversification offers potential for a more elaborated information processing. On the other hand, diversity of migration status and age has been shown to be challenging for individuals, due to intergroup hostility, prejudices, and difficulties of intercultural communication. Current research thus focusses on the interaction of employees with different cultural heritages, as well as on their intergroup attitudes and competences. Thereby, leaders have been shown to shape the way diversity is considered in their teams in a top-down process. However, their perception of diversity as well as related challenges and chances are poorly investigated. The current paper thus aims to contribute to the understanding of leader's perspective on and role in diversity-management by building on a comparative qualitative study with sixteen employees and twenty-two leaders. The overall research questions are how employees and leaders perceive cultural diversity from their specific point of view, which experiences are likely to contribute to their opinion on and perception of diversity and in how far do employees and leaders differ in these aspects. The results show that in general, only a small proportion of the employees and managers are aware of the opportunities and risks of diversity and the specific challenges for people with a migration background, which highly depended on the amount of intercultural interaction. More specifically, employees are aware of the topic of diversity in general but have poor competences in dealing with diversity in their daily working life. This seems to be associated with lack of experience with intercultural interaction and a lack of support from the respective organizations/leaders. Leaders are rarely aware of this lack of support. The results indicate that leaders' experiences with cultural and age diversity, their identification with the company and previous diversity measures in the context of the companies' policy towards diversity seem to be relevant for the formation of leaders' attitudes. Furthermore, university education does not prepare future leaders for working with diverse teams, which leads executives insecure in diverse situations or to develop the skills in trial-and-error processes. As a consequence, most participants focus on the question whether they do or do not want diversity within their teams and companies, while they actually fail to perceive the diversity that is already there. This study was able to show relevant connections for future research in the field of diversity and diversity management. It is particularly noteworthy that managers are by no means mere intermediaries between an overarching diversity strategy and employees. Awareness of cultural diversity seems to be an essential prerequisite for tackling structural discrimination. Future studies are encouraged to consider certain aspects of perspectives related to diversity.