How managers can tame stereotyping at the office

Kenyans watched in shock as Pat Robertson made outlandish claims about Kenya last week on his globally popular ‘The 700 Club’. Kenyan media showed clips from the programme whereby an anonymous wrote to ask the televangelist if he or she should reconsider travelling to Kenya on a mission as a result of the Ebola outbreak.

Pat Robertson notified the would-be missionary not to travel to Kenya because “the people have Aids” and even “the towels can have Aids”. Kenyans angrily took to Twitter with the marker #SomeoneTellPatRoberson. Despite the broadcaster CBN later apologising, many faithful ‘The 700 Club’ viewers expressed shock that a trusted religious broadcaster could hold such views in the first place.

However, most ‘The 700 Club’ viewers live outside the United States. Americans, on the other hand, remain very aware of Pat Robertson’s follies.

One may view YouTube clips of the televangelist claiming that God told him Mitt Romney would win the US presidential election and get re-elected to a second term. Well...someone might want to tell Pat Robertson to recheck his connection to God because a week after his prediction, President Obama won re-election against Mitt Romney.

Pat Robertson also purportedly prophesied that the then-Soviet Union would invade the Middle East, a terrorist with a nuclear bomb would strike the US, President Clinton would not get re-elected, and tsunamis would wreak havoc on the coasts of the US. All these, and many more, never came to pass.

In creating stereotypes, we develop categories and assign traits. We assign a person to that category based on our observations. Then, we make assumptions that since the other person belongs to that category, then they possess the traits for that category of person.

Since I am a professor, let me pick on my category as an example. First, people may believe that professors are absent-minded. Then, students in a class might note that their instructor is a professor. Next, the students may assign the traits of that category of person to me by thinking that therefore Prof Scott is absent-minded.

Psychologists refer to the above downward spiral as self-fulfilling prophecy. While we may discuss confused televangelists on the other side of the world, stereotyping and its negative impacts hits us right here in our offices. Employees subconsciously act out on the expectations held on them. It may require coaching and incredible self-awareness for employees to rise above the self-fulfilling prophecy expectations that those around them hold on them.

The stress associated with stereotyping leads to unhappy employees, lack of organisational trust, and lower performance.

So as a manager, how do you stamp out stereotypes in your business? Start by realising the accuracy and inaccuracy around stereotypes and training your employees.

Stereotypes usually possess some accuracy, but also many distortions and errors. Clearly the traits do not describe everyone in a particular group. People tend to screen out information that does not fit with their stereotype. As a manager, work hard to mix different types of people in your firm through team building, joint assignments, and geographic reassignment.

In thinking of steps to follow to reduce stereotyping in your firm and fix the negative effects from the practice, start with awareness training. First your organisational leaders should learn the effects of negative stereotype perceptions that hurt the business. Then train your employees on cultural history that may lead to some stereotypes and then how to appreciate different cultures. Second, mix your employees so different categories work together.

Training and mixing alone does not solve the self-fulfilling prophecy problem part of stereotyping. So, use researcher Dr Durbin’s three-pronged strategy that include supporting a learning orientation in your firm. Encourage learning about, not just mixing with, other cultures or people types.

In summary, fixing the stereotype problem takes time and effort. However, a low-stereotype environment improves performance and improves your employee’s sense of self-worth.

Share your thoughts, experiences, and debate opinions this week at #SomeoneTellPatRobertson on Twitter.

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