Re-writing Imagination into Management

Introduction

I think [managers] need the skills that allow them to work within a system but to deliver the results that they want, that the people they support, need. I think that’s very, very challenging. I think the level of innovation, the level of imagination needed to work within what are increasingly tighter controls and restrictions, whilst delivering, I think is very challenging.

This book is about the role of imagination in management, and specifically, in managing diversity. The quotation I have chosen as my introduction comes from an interview I carried out with the chief executive of a large voluntary organisation in the UK that provides a wide range of services for people with disabilities. In it we discussed the issues and dilemmas he was experiencing in implementing diversity initiatives within the organisation. I chose this quotation because of his emphasis on imagination – something that is rarely discussed in the plethora of books and articles on diversity management. But imagination is at the heart of managing diversity, in particular, two forms of imaginative activity, metaphor and dialectic.

Managing diversity requires us to engage in the tension field between similarity and difference. Diversity management is about the processes involved in identifying what we have in common with each other, where we differ and what implications these similarities and differences have for achieving organisational goals. But the particular similarities and differences that diversity management concerns itself with are those of identity, the ways in which we create images of ourselves and others. Metaphor and dialectic, considered as modes of thinking, open up new possibilities for engaging creatively in this tension field.
Within contemporary management discourse ‘managing diversity’ has become the expression of choice to refer to a wide range of policies and practices designed to respond to the increasingly heterogeneous nature of the workplace. Usually regarded as having emerged from the United States as a successor to, or development from the discourse of equal opportunities (Kirton and Green 2005, Wrench 2005, Kandola and Fullerton 2003), the term is generally used to refer to the practices that have evolved in response to the need to accommodate a workforce in which the hegemonic image of the worker as white, male, young, able bodied and heterosexual has been challenged by the competing demands of women and people from groups and communities who may have experienced significant disadvantage in the workplace. Many of these demands have also been supported by an increasing body of legislation that requires employers to have good policies and practices in place to ensure that workers are not subject to unfair discrimination. Although much of this discourse tends to focus on differences within formally bounded geographic areas such as cities, regions or nations, as organisations are increasingly likely to work across national boundaries, diversity management is also being extended to encompass the cultural issues that arise in multinational teams.

In this book I am taking a rather different approach to those which are primarily concerned with policy and practice. I have chosen to concentrate on the individual and on the importance of the imagination for increasing agency. By emphasising the role of the imagination I am focussing my attention at the level of attitudes and beliefs rather than behaviours. The inter-relationship between belief and behaviour is complex, however much practice based work aims to inculcate a prescriptive collection of behaviours and techniques in the hope that following these will lead to a more accessible workplace culture in which individual differences are not only tolerated but welcomed. This approach is not necessarily wrong. Certainly, overtly discriminatory and oppressive behaviour should always be challenged. Learning and adopting new forms of behaviour can lead to changes in the way people think, and there is a wide ranging literature that explores how this occurs in organisations (although often, following Foucault’s idea of disciplining regimes, in an undesirable way). However, this approach has been overemphasised at the loss of more nuanced attention to the importance of underlying beliefs and the influence that our imaginative constructs play in forming and shaping our responses to the environments and relationships in which we find ourselves. I am specifically interested in how social imagination constitutes social reality (Ricoeur 1986) and whether increasing our aware-