

German Leader Leaves Diversity Practitioners Wondering

11/9/2010

By Steve Taylor

On Oct. 16, 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that her country's effort to create a multicultural society "has failed, utterly failed." Speaking before an audience of young members of her conservative Christian Democratic Union Party in Potsdam, Merkel said of the millions of non-German workers who've come to (or been born in) the country since the 1950s: "We kidded ourselves a while. We said, 'They won't stay. Sometime they'll be gone.' But this isn't reality."



Angela
Merkel

The chancellor added that simply allowing people of different cultures to co-exist without integration had not worked in a country that has 16 million people of migrant background, including 4 million Muslims. Many native Germans say such individuals enjoy the country's social benefits while remaining hostile to German culture and religion.

Merkel said the immigrants should learn to speak German and to respect German religious beliefs. "We feel tied to Christian values. Those who don't accept them don't have a place here," said the chancellor.

In Europe, Merkel's speech was seen by many observers as a sharp swerve to the political right. Others said the chancellor was trying to prevent such a swing by taking leverage away from her right-wing critics.

However, in the U.S., conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh saw the comments as the collapse of the left. "Europe is years ahead of us trying everything that we're going through now, and it's all crumbling," Limbaugh said on his web site. "You see what's happening in France. They're gonna raise the retirement age, and there are riots because the people want the freebies they have been told they're gonna get. You can't sustain it. Liberalism doesn't work. It fails."

Diversity Professionals React

Diversity professionals considered the impact the chancellor's words might have on workers around the world.

"It's that kind of strong [statement] that captures the attention," said a diversity officer who works in Western Europe for a U.S. corporation and who asked not to be identified by name. "Behind it, I think, the debate is around how to better manage the reality that countries are becoming more multicultural."

"Historically, when nations are in economic distress, there arises xenophobia," commented Murray A. Mann, principal at Global Diversity Solutions Group in Chicago. "People are fearful. They need somebody to blame."

"It's a slap in the faces of all the many people who have worked on making the multicultural societies in Europe work over the past decades," said Michael Stuber, a diversity consultant in Hamburg, Germany. "A large amount of great programs have led to real progress, which is now partially rolled back overnight."

Business Leaders Optimistic

SHRM Online consulted business diversity experts in Europe and the U.S., connecting with them by telephone, Skype and e-mail. There was widespread agreement that Merkel's speech was not as radical as it seemed, plus some optimism that it would lead to reforms in Germany.

Several experts said that businesses would be driving those changes rather than reacting to politicians.

"I'm quite sure [Merkel's speech] discouraged people coming to Germany," said consultant Steffen Henkel of Cifa Crossculture in Stuttgart, a firm that helps companies assimilate foreign employees. "It doesn't sound like we opened our arms to people."

Michael Eggers from Bremen added, "At least she shows a sign that from now on we are changing this attitude. We want to be more open-minded to the world than before." Eggers is principal of Multicultura, which advises employers on language and cultural matters. "Merkel said that all integration efforts so far have failed, (but) she doesn't say in the future they're going to fail again," he observed.

"Germany should have started decades ago to support the millions of so-called guest workers they called to rebuild the country after the war," said Stuber. "This should have included a different education of the general public regarding the value of a multicultural society and the need for everyone involved to learn and change."

"Everyone" includes the immigrants, Henkel said. "I think it's quite normal that a German company wants people working for them [who] speak German." But as for requiring immigrants to give up their culture, he said, business leaders accept that it's neither possible nor necessary. "I think they

accept that there are different cultures, and people don't have to adjust culturally, [but] only [accept the ways that] business is done."

As Stuber put it, "The governments should have [started] to learn from the corporate world as of 15 years ago." Despite Merkel's remarks, he said, "I don't see companies giving up on diversity efforts as these are, hopefully, driven by a business rationale."

The View from the U.S.

American diversity experts agree with their European colleagues. "Given the global trend of an aging population, a low birth rate in many countries and the dramatically changing role of women as both consumers and decision-makers, multiculturalism is a *fait accompli*," said a chief diversity officer for a large global firm that requested anonymity for this article. "It's undeniable and non-negotiable... The [European] business community is likely out ahead of the general population, as has been true in the U.S."

"Companies that are using diversity effectively are making a lot of money out of it," said Neal Goodman, owner of Global Dynamics in Aventura, Fla. "If you look at corporations that sent representatives to the SHRM diversity conference I was at [in October 2010, in New Orleans], they're not sending them out of goodwill. They want to learn things they can apply back in their own companies."

"When a pharmaceutical company reaches out to doctors of diverse backgrounds and asks them to nominate people of diverse backgrounds to take part in clinical trials, so the company can develop drugs to help [such people], they're doing applied diversity," he explained.

"Corporate leaders realize that in order to be competitive, diversity and inclusion are critical," Mann added.

Valda Ford, CEO of the Center for Human Diversity in Bellevue, Neb., agreed, and said that companies that want to be "nimble" in international commerce "need to have the benefit of diversity of thought and intellect that comes from [including] people from around the world."

An Inclusive State of Mind

"I'm very sure that diversity is something good, *ja?*" said Henkel, "that it helps create new ideas, makes people see not only their own point of view but see other points of view. But it's not something that just happens. It must be produced by a certain state of mind."

That diversity mind-set could be difficult to attain in a country where, historically, "If you weren't born to German parents, you weren't German," according to Goodman.

Is such change possible?

“Most European countries have done many good programs, but too many political leaders have, at the same time, responded to national attitudes among the general society to secure their power,” said Stuber. “They all should have learned that it is impossible to preach integration and multiculturalism and allow xenophobic sentiments at the same time. The need [is] for clear consistency and credibility.”

Mann suggested another lesson from corporate diversity practice: “Part of the role for leaders is to be able to serve the needs of your employees.” For governments as for corporations, the aim is to “create that communication, to increase productivity with the emerging workforces we are dealing with,” he said. That’s the HR person’s role.

Steve Taylor is a freelance writer based in Arlington, Va.

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