Managing Multicultural Teams

The case for developing cultural sensitivity in international teams

Multicultural teams bring obvious benefits but they also bring the challenges of ‘internal integration’ and tend to be either highly effective or highly ineffective. David Trickey, a Director of WorldWork Ltd., makes the case for why global teams need to develop sensitivity to the dynamics of multicultural collaboration.

The advantages of multicultural teamwork are clear - the creative potential of multiple perspectives together with the sharing of local insights and stronger buy-in to new projects are, in theory, attractive. But when the colleagues we work with on such teams do not share our language or our assumptions about ‘how best to achieve our goals’, let alone the same building or country, then multicultural team potential can remain unrealised. While international teams meet today’s need for ‘external adaptation’ to the global business environment, they also bring challenges of ‘internal integration’. Diversity of background and perspective bring special challenges such as: how to create and develop trust; how to foster a sense of common purpose, team identity and loyalty; how to communicate intentions clearly and build commitment to decisions affecting the team. With the additional dimension of distance and the reliance on technologically mediated communication, these challenges become more complex since, in virtual teams, we know even less about what we don’t know and how it may show up. Unmet, these challenges can add exponentially to already tight budgets, as well as creating barriers to longer-term relationships with partners in other countries.

Research shows that multicultural teams are rarely average performers - they are either highly effective or highly ineffective when compared to more homogeneous teams. To ensure you play your part in building team integration, we have tried to answer the question, ‘Why is cultural sensitivity a prerequisite for a high performing multicultural team?’
People are different and similar to other people in many ways. This makes collaboration in diverse teams rewarding, fun and ultimately productive. However, Nancy Adler, an expert on international organisational behaviour, once advised: ‘assume difference until similarity has been proven’. This is because team members can show an over-optimistic tendency to look for reassuring similarities in approach at the outset. In addition, multicultural teams often suffer a period of ‘paralysis by politeness’ at the start of their collaboration during which open acknowledgement of cultural diversity is avoided because people lack confidence in expressing their real concerns about others' behaviour.

But think about yourself for a moment. Were you born and brought up in your country of origin? Were your parents from the same cultural background as that country? Did you go to school in that country? Over your life have most of your friends and colleagues come from your own country of origin? Have you lived most of your life in that country? Have you lived within your country of origin between the ages of 14 and 18? If the answer to these questions is generally ‘yes’, then you may be more influenced by your national culture in the way you view the world around you than you imagine – or would even like to admit. Cultural conditioning starts early, even before we can speak.

Culture: everything that is taken for granted by a particular group of people as the obvious way of thinking and acting

Sterotypes vs Prototypes

*Cultural stereotypes* are applications of generalisations to every person in a cultural group, or generalize from only a few people in a group. In addition,

- They are usually, but not always, negative.
- They provide rigid “definitive answers” and reflect a closed mind.
- They are generalized from only a few people or contexts.

*Cultural prototypes* are tendencies of a majority of people in a cultural group to hold certain values or beliefs and to engage in certain types of behaviour. In addition,

- They try to describe rather than judge.
- They are “first best guesses” and are open to modification.
- They are generalized from a wide number of people and contexts.

As you can imagine, prototypes are more useful than stereotypes. They can help us to initially orient ourselves when we come into contact with large numbers of people from a particular cultural group. With cultural sensitivity, we should be able to bring our prototypes to a specific situation or individual and change them on the basis of careful listening and observation, as well as exploration of differences and negotiation of meaning. The cultural dimensions in the online modules will help you navigate using some of the key prototypes.
By the age of about 14 we have learned through social imitation most of the values and beliefs that will guide our behaviour through the rest of our lives. When we enter an organisation for work we are very culturally ‘formed’. It’s difficult to know when we ‘became’ French or Austrian or Italian.

In fact there was no particular moment when this ‘conversion’ happened. It’s a process of thousands of micro moments when we learn to think and act in a socially acceptable way - a bit like how a stalagmite grows imperceptibly over time as each drop of water leaves a minute calcium deposit, slowly building up over the years to form each unique structure.

Of course, we have our own special personality too, resulting from a mixture of nature and nurture – of DNA and social conditioning in our early years of growing up. But culture is the learned and shared values, beliefs and behaviours of a group. And we are members of many groups: national groups, professional groups, gender groups, organizational groups. However, research has shown that national culture has the most significant impact on our values and beliefs about how the world should be and how we should behave when faced with basic challenges.

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Cultural conditioning starts early as we slowly and imperceptibly become ‘stalagmites’.

Making intercultural relations work

The first stage, and one objective of this online development programme, is to understand more about how you are a product of your own culture. If we are aware of our own assumptions, which we carry with us, we have more control over the impact we have on others. We become mindful, not mindless.

We should work on our own feelings of discomfort and on reducing the discomfort of others. It is through the mirror of others that we learn to know ourselves. It is through facing our own discomfort and anxiety that we grow. This experience helps us to question our routine way of thinking and behaving. It gives us an insight into another world. In fact, your experience of working with cultural ‘opposites’ is a huge opportunity to expand your decision making options and perspective on business solutions.

In intercultural communication we often have an Intention/Impact Gap, ie a gap between what we wanted to communicate and the effect we have on the other person. Most of us are doing our best most of the time to be ‘normal’, ‘polite’, ‘constructive’ and ‘professional’. Unfortunately, people who are culturally different are normal, polite, constructive and professional in different ways. Often ‘common sense’ is no longer common and makes no sense.

To begin to see things from another perspective and struggle with the other person to find solutions (rather than struggling against them), we need to really believe that our way is just one way. This is hard because it has served us well in the past.

The ability to enter into another perspective temporarily (ie. empathy) is a key intercultural skill. This means we have to deal with our own ethnocentrism and go beyond it. Learning to explain our own basic assumptions and values and those of our co-nationals – we can start by using the cultural dimensions models as a grammar to talk about cultural differences.
Let’s take the example of ‘change’. We all need to change – it’s called life! But experience has taught us how to deal with change in different ways. We learn this from parents, school friends, teachers and colleagues. If we were brought up in Germany, it is probable that these lessons lead us to seek reassurance through planning for change, whereas for others, brought up in Italy for example, change should be handled through an individual’s flexible and pragmatic responses to (constantly!) evolving circumstances. This difference in responsiveness to change would have important implications for the expected allocation of time and effort within a team with members having these two different preferences present – it’s as if they were dancing to different music through the earphones of separate iPods. If people in the team dance to different rhythms, the likelihood is that, at some stage, feet will get trodden on.

So, what are the implications of all this for multicultural team collaboration? In essence, because we have developed our own ‘worldview’ on how basic questions should be handled (eg: how to deal with equality; balancing the needs of individuals and groups; the uncertainty of the future; the implications of being born a boy or a girl; how emotions should or shouldn’t be expressed; how rules or exceptions should be applied) and because that view is generally shared by the cultural group we grew up and socialised with, we get to the point when we take this particular view as the view. We are no longer conscious of it being a view. We lose any sense of the relativity of approaches.

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**Icebergs**

Our behaviour is consistent with our beliefs and values (V1 produces B1). And so is that of other cultural groups (V2 produces B2). But we often judge others according to our own firmly held beliefs and values (V1 judges B2); others do the same (V2 judges B1).

Because the only visible aspect of their culture is behaviour (what they do and say) we react to this – often negatively – and fail to look below the surface and understand the deeper reasons for their actions and words.

By exploring our own values and beliefs and those of other cultural groups, we can reduce much of the stress from working internationally by predicting how their behaviour may differ from our own and understanding that it is perfectly coherent.

It is the unpredictability of our interactions with people from other cultures that leads to feelings of emotional vulnerability and threat as well as anger and frustration. What one person believes to be appropriate behaviour in certain circumstances can be judged as totally inappropriate by others if their systems of beliefs and values are different. Although we personally may not always conform to these invisible rules ourselves, we usually have a clear idea of what can be considered “normal” behaviour in our own culture.
There is an old Japanese saying that fish are the least able to describe water. In the same way if we live in our own culture most of the time – it’s just there. We are no longer conscious of it. As another saying goes: ‘the outsider sees everything but understands nothing; the insider understands everything but sees nothing’.

Fortunately, there are alternative ways to explore the relativity of our own approach, apart from leaving our own culture of origin for a number of years to learn how ‘we’ are seen by others. Cultural sensitivity training can help the team to build a common perception that there are other, equally valid, ways of achieving the same objectives within the team. In fact, you may come to the uncomfortable conclusion that even when you and your team have identified a common goal, the challenge is more about how to work with colleagues whose approach is logical and clearly right (within their own context), but is the opposite of yours – which is also right (within your own context).

So, we need to develop cultural sensitivity because in multicultural teams members have different - often culturally motivated - approaches to teamworking. However, it is not simply enough to understand these differences in preferred approach. We also have to respond to these differences. We need to do something about them. This means we must make choices in how we respond. We need to go beyond our default approach or ‘instinct’ and become strategic (no choice; no strategy). This leads us to two more questions we should be asking ourselves as ‘responsible’ members of a multicultural team. The first is:

“How should I balance my need for authenticity and ‘being myself’ with people from other cultures, with the need to be adaptable (and self-confident enough) to enter into their comfort zone and ‘behave more like them’?”

The second question is, ‘how much should I make an effort to understand them when THEY don’t seem to be making the same effort to build a bridge towards me? It takes two to tango, after all’

In our experience, multicultural teams usually have members at very different stages of intercultural sensitivity. Some of you in the team will be highly international in background – from a bi-cultural or even multicultural family - having lived abroad for many years outside your normal ‘water’ or through a growing self-awareness that to some degree you are a product of your own cultural roots and that teamwork itself can be defined in different ways according to how you have been brought up. As cultural products, we carry a heavy load of cultural luggage with us wherever we go and this can impact on even the best of our intentions when communicating. Knowing this gives us more control. We recognize that WE are part of the problem – not only THEM. In this sense learning about culture always starts with learning about ourselves.

Others in the team may be considerably less aware of the impact of culture – even to the extent of saying they see no signs of culturally motivated behaviour in their fellow member, ‘it’s just about personalities’.

As the founder of Honda, Takeo Fujisawa, said: “Japanese and American management practices are 95% the same … and differ in all important respects”. Perhaps it could be said that the different approaches which team members bring within all global companies are in 95% of cases the same…but different in all important respects. And perhaps there lies the great opportunity and challenge for multicultural team-working over the next few years: how to get the best out of the differences while building commitment to the same goals.

The key to successful working relationships in international teams lies in first, finding the desire and then developing the ability to see how people who grew up differently to us are in fact just as complex as we are – but in a different way. Then as we learn more about their special complexity, to find practical ways of getting things done in the team together.