

10.6: Multicultural Teams

What are some challenges and best practices for managing and working with multicultural teams?

As globalization has increased over the last decades, workplaces have felt the impact of working within multicultural teams. The earlier section on team diversity outlined some of the highlights and benefits of working on diverse teams, and a multicultural group certainly qualifies as diverse. However, there are some key practices that are recommended to those who are leading multicultural teams so that they can parlay the diversity into an advantage and not be derailed by it.

People may assume that communication is the key factor that can derail multicultural teams, as participants may have different languages and communication styles. In the *Harvard Business Review* article “Managing Multicultural Teams,” the authors point out four key cultural differences that can cause destructive conflicts in a team.¹² The first difference is **direct** versus **indirect communication**. Some cultures are very direct and explicit in their communication, while others are more indirect and ask questions rather than pointing out problems. This difference can cause conflict because, at the extreme, the direct style may be considered offensive by some, while the indirect style may be perceived as unproductive and passive-aggressive in team interactions.

The second difference that multicultural teams may face is *trouble with accents and fluency*. When team members don’t speak the same language, there may be one language that dominates the group interaction—and those who don’t speak it may feel left out. The speakers of the primary language may feel that those members don’t contribute as much or are less competent. The next challenge is when there are *differing attitudes toward hierarchy*. Some cultures are very respectful of the hierarchy and will treat team

members based on that hierarchy. Other cultures are more egalitarian and don’t observe hierarchical differences to the same degree. This may lead to clashes if some people feel that they are being disrespected and not treated according to their status. The final difference that may challenge multicultural teams is *conflicting decision-making norms*. Different cultures make decisions differently, and some will apply a great deal of analysis and preparation beforehand. Those cultures that make decisions more quickly (and need just enough information to make a decision) may be frustrated with the slow response and relatively longer thought process.

These cultural differences are good examples of how everyday team activities (decision-making, communication, interaction among team members) may become points of contention for a multicultural team if there isn’t adequate understanding of everyone’s culture. The authors propose that there are several potential interventions to try if these conflicts arise. One simple intervention is **adaptation**, which is working with or around differences. This is best used when team members are willing to acknowledge the cultural differences and learn how to work with them. The next intervention technique is **structural intervention**, or reorganizing to reduce friction on the team. This technique is best used if there are unproductive subgroups or cliques within the team that need to be moved around. **Managerial intervention** is the technique of making decisions by management and without team involvement. This technique is one that should be used sparingly, as it essentially shows that the team needs guidance and can’t move forward without management getting involved. Finally, **exit** is an intervention of last resort, and is the voluntary or involuntary removal of a team member. If the differences and challenges have proven to be so great that an individual on the team can no longer work with the team productively, then it may be necessary to remove the team member in question.

There are some people who seem to be innately aware of and able to work with cultural differences on teams and in their organizations. These individuals might be said to have **cultural intelligence**. Cultural intelligence is a competency and a skill that enables individuals to function effectively in cross-cultural environments. It develops as people become more aware of the influence of culture and more capable of adapting their behavior to the norms of other cultures. In the *IESE Insight* article entitled “Cultural Competence: Why It Matters and How You Can Acquire It” (Lee and Liao, 2015), the authors assert that “multicultural leaders may relate better to team members from different cultures and resolve conflicts more easily.¹³ Their multiple talents can also be put to good use in international negotiations.” Multicultural leaders don’t have a lot of “baggage” from any one culture, and so are sometimes perceived as being culturally neutral. They are very good at handling diversity, which gives them a great advantage in their relationships with teammates.

In order to help employees become better team members in a world that is increasingly multicultural, there are a few best practices that the authors recommend for honing cross-cultural skills. The first is to “broaden your mind”—expand your own cultural channels (travel, movies, books) and surround yourself with people from other cultures. This helps to raise your own awareness of the cultural differences and norms that you may encounter. Another best practice is to “develop your cross-cultural skills through

practice” and experiential learning. You may have the opportunity to work or travel abroad—but if you don’t, then getting to know some of your company’s cross-cultural colleagues or foreign visitors will help you to practice your skills. Serving on a cross-cultural project team and taking the time to get to know and bond with your global colleagues is an excellent way to develop skills. In my own “past life,” I led a global human resources organization, and my team included employees from China, India, Brazil, Hungary, the Netherlands, and the United States. We would have annual meetings as a global HR team, and it was so rewarding to share and learn about each other’s cultures. We would initiate the week with a gift exchange in a “show and tell” format from our various countries, so that everyone would learn a little bit more about the cultures in which our fellow colleagues were working. This type of interaction within a global team is a great way to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and communication, and to sharpen everyone’s cultural intelligence.

managing change

Understanding Our Global Colleagues

If you are a part of a global team, there are so many challenges that confront you even before you talk about people dynamics and cultural differences. You first may have to juggle time zone differences to find an adequate meeting time that suits all team members. (I used to have a team call with my Chinese colleagues at 8 p.m. my time, so that I could catch them at 8 a.m. in China the next day!) Language challenges can also pose a problem. In many countries, people are beginning to learn English as one of the main business languages. However, as I have experienced, people don’t always speak their language the same way that you might learn their language in a book. There are colloquialisms, terms, and abbreviations of words that you can’t learn in a classroom—you need to experience how people speak in their native countries.

You also need to be open-minded and look at situations from the perspective of your colleagues’ cultures, just as you hope they will be open-minded about yours. This is referred to as cultural intelligence. Whenever I would travel globally to visit my colleagues in other countries, I would see foods, traditions, situations, and behaviors that were very “foreign” to me. Although my first response to experiencing these might be to think “wow, that’s strange,” I would try to think about what some of my global colleagues find “foreign” when they come to visit me in the United States. For example, my travel to China would put me in contact with chicken feet, a very popular food in China and one that I dislike immensely. Whenever I was offered chicken feet, I would turn them down in the most polite way possible and would take another food that was offered instead. I started to wonder about what my Chinese colleagues thought about the food when they’d come to visit me in the United States. Every year, I would host a global HR meeting in the United States, and a bit part of that meeting was the camaraderie and the sharing of various meals together. When I asked my Chinese colleagues what foods they thought were unpleasant, they mentioned cheese and meat. I was surprised about the meat, and when I asked, they said that it wasn’t the meat itself necessarily, but it was the giant portions of meat that Americans will eat that, to them, is pretty unappetizing. Again, it is so important to check yourself and your own culture every so often, and to think about those elements that we take for granted (e.g., gigantic meat portions) and try to look at them from the eyes of another culture. It really makes us smarter and better partners to our global colleagues around the world.

In the *HBR* article “Getting Cross-Cultural Teamwork Right,” the author states that three key factors—mutual learning, mutual understanding, and mutual teaching—build trust with cross-cultural colleagues as you try to bridge cultural gaps. With mutual learning, global colleagues learn from each other and absorb the new culture and behaviors through listening and observation. In mutual understanding, you try to understand the logic and cultural behaviors of the new culture to understand why people are doing what they do. This, of course, requires suspending judgment and trying to understand and embrace the differences. Finally, mutual teaching involves instructing and facilitating. This means trying to bridge the gap between the two cultures and helping yourself and others see where different cultures are coming from in order to resolve misunderstandings.

Understanding and finding common ground with your global colleagues isn’t easy, and it takes patience and continuous improvement. In the end, however, I think that you will find it one of the most rewarding and enlightening things you can do. The more we work to close the multicultural “gap” and make it a multicultural advantage, the better off we will be as professionals and as people.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some multicultural experiences that you’ve had in which you feel that there was a very wide gap between you and an individual from another culture? How did you handle it?
2. Has economic globalization helped people to bridge these cultural gaps? Why or why not?

Once you have a sense of the different cultures and have started to work on developing your cross-cultural skills, another good practice is to “boost your cultural metacognition” and monitor your own behavior in multicultural situations. When you are in a situation in which you are interacting with multicultural individuals, you should test yourself and be aware of how you act and feel. Observe both your positive and negative interactions with people, and learn from them. Developing “**cognitive complexity**” is the final best practice for boosting multicultural skills. This is the most advanced, and it requires being able to view situations from more than one cultural framework. In order to see things from another perspective, you need to have a strong sense of emotional intelligence, empathy, and sympathy, and be willing to engage in honest communications.

In the *Harvard Business Review* article “Cultural Intelligence,” the authors describe three sources of cultural intelligence that teams should consider if they are serious about becoming more adept in their cross-cultural skills and understanding. These sources, very simply, are **head**, **body**, and **heart**. One first learns about the beliefs, customs, and taboos of foreign cultures via the **head**. Training programs are based on providing this type of overview information—which is helpful, but obviously isn’t experiential. This is the cognitive component of cultural intelligence. The second source, the **body**, involves more commitment and experimentation with the new culture. It is this physical component (demeanor, eye contact, posture, accent) that shows a deeper level of understanding of the new culture and its physical manifestations. The final source, the **heart**, deals with a person’s own confidence in their ability to adapt to and deal well with cultures outside of their own. Heart really speaks to one’s own level of emotional commitment and motivation to understand the new culture.

The authors have created a quick assessment to diagnose cultural intelligence, based on these cognitive, physical, and emotional/motivational measures (i.e., head, body, heart).

Please refer to **Table 10.6.1** for a short diagnostic that allows you to assess your cultural intelligence.

	Give your responses on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 means you strongly disagree and 5 that you strongly agree
	Before I interact with people from a new culture, I wonder to myself what I hope to achieve
	If I encounter something unexpected while working in a new culture I use that experience to build new ways to approach other cultures in the future
	I plan on how I am going to relate to people from a different culture before I meet them
	When I come into a new cultural situation I can immediately sense whether things are going well or if things are going wrong
	Add your total from the four questions above
	Divide the total by four. This is your Cognitive Cultural Quotient
	It is easy for me to change my body language (posture or facial expression) to suit people from a different culture
	I can change my expressions when a cultural encounter requires it
	I can easily change the way I act when a cross cultural encounter seems to require it
	Add your total from the four questions above
	Divide the total by four. This is your Cognitive Physical Quotient
	I have confidence in my ability to deal well with people from different cultures than mine
	I am certain that I can befriend people of different cultural backgrounds than mine
	I can adapt to the lifestyles of a different culture with relative ease

	Give your responses on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 means you strongly disagree and 5 that you strongly agree
	I am confident in my ability to deal with an unfamiliar cultural situation or encounter
	Add your total from the four questions above
	Divide the total by four. This is your <i>This is your Emotional Motivational Cognitive Quotient</i>

Generally, scoring below 3 in any one of the three measures signals an area requiring improvement.

Averaging over 4 displays strength in cultural intelligence

Adapted from "Cultural Intelligence" Earley and Mosakowski, Harvard Business Review, October 2004

Table 10.6.1

Cultural intelligence is an extension of emotional intelligence. An individual must have a level of awareness and understanding of the new culture so that he can adapt to the style, pace, language, nonverbal communication, etc. and work together successfully with the new culture. A multicultural team can only find success if its members take the time to understand each other and ensure that everyone feels included. Multiculturalism and cultural intelligence are traits that are taking on increasing importance in the business world today.¹⁴ By following best practices and avoiding the challenges and pitfalls that can derail a multicultural team, a team can find great success and personal fulfillment well beyond the boundaries of the project or work engagement.

concept check

- What are some of the challenges of a multicultural team?
- Explain the cultural intelligence techniques of head, body, and heart.

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