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## Cultural Disharmony Undermines Workplace Creativity

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**Managing cultural friction not only creates a more harmonious workplace, says professor Roy Y.J. Chua, but ensures that you reap the creative benefits of multiculturalism at its best.**

by Michael Blanding

In today's global work environment, it's a given that companies need culturally diverse teams to succeed. Both scientific studies and common sense tell us that having people with different viewpoints onboard increases the creativity that teams will employ in solving problems. Of course, that's assuming all members of the team are pulling in the same direction.

But what if they aren't? Can being exposed to intercultural conflicts and tensions have an impact even on observers who are not directly involved in these disharmonies?

Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Roy Y. J. Chua started asking those questions a few years ago, when writing a case about a Chinese luxury apparel company. The firm had members from China, Hong Kong, Germany, and France, who were all working together to meld Chinese elements with Western fashion. As he observed them, however, Chua saw tension and miscommunication based on cultural differences. "Even though, when you asked them, they didn't think it was a problem, I wondered if it could have an indirect impact on people observing these tensions," he says.

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### ROY Y.J. CHUA

Roy Chua is an assistant professor in the Organizational Behavior unit at Harvard Business School.

### CONTACT

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Chua compares it to the kind of "hostile work environment" that occurs in cases of sexual harassment or racial discrimination—in which coworkers' morale or performance suffers even when they are not the direct targets of abuse. He coined a term for the phenomenon, "ambient cultural disharmony," which he discusses in depth in *The Costs of Ambient Cultural Disharmony: Indirect Intercultural Conflicts in Social Environment Undermine Creativity*, a paper published this month in the *Academy of Management Journal*.



Multicultural teams may need managerial nurturing to overcome frictions. *Photo: iStockPhoto*

"A lot of times when we study cultural conflict, it's about people directly involved in conflict," says Chua. "The key word here is 'ambient,' looking at the effect that cultural conflicts can have on an observer. That flows more through the perceptions we have about other cultures."

The effect of indirect conflict happens all the time. Children who witness conflict between parents may develop negative ideas about marriage, just as citizens of the United States

and China may develop bad feelings about each other from watching their leaders squabble. So why wouldn't the same thing happen in the workplace?

## TESTING FOR LIKE

Chua tested the concept in a series of studies. In the first study, he asked a group of online participants to list the important people in their social networks, noting their cultural backgrounds and whether they liked each other. Then he asked them to do a word association exercise that compared their ability to connect disparate ideas across cultures—a precursor to creativity in a global context. For example, when given the words "Great," "Street," and "Berlin," they should correctly answer "Wall," connecting the Chinese "Great Wall," American "Wall Street," and German "Berlin Wall."

After tallying the length of time it took for participants to come up with the right answers, he found those who had more people in their social network from different cultures who disliked each other did about 23 percent worse on the test. This makes sense, says Chua. "Just as a child observing parents not getting along may develop the notion that marriage is very difficult, those seeing conflict around them by involving people of different cultures may develop the idea that ideas from those cultures are incompatible and cannot be easily combined."

For his second study, Chua asked participants to call to mind two friends or acquaintances from the same or a different cultural background who did or didn't get along with other people. Participants were then asked to read Chua's business case on the Chinese fashion house, and afterward told to come up with ideas for next year's collection that would blend Asian and Western styles.

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When expert fashion designers judged the creativity of the ideas, they determined that the least creative ones came from participants who had called to mind acquaintances from different cultural backgrounds with disharmonious relationships. [On average, those who recalled that cross-cultural disharmony generated ideas receiving creativity scores 23 percent lower than the average of the other conditions. In the other three conditions, creativity was about the same.]

## **AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE PAY MORE ATTENTION TO NEGATIVE INFORMATION BECAUSE IT IS A SIGNAL OF DANGER”**

Interestingly, while ambient cultural disharmony decreased creativity, ambient cultural *harmony* (that is, observers experiencing people from other cultures having a good relationship) did not promote creativity. That reflects human nature, Chua says. "As human beings, we pay more attention to negative information because it is a signal of danger. Positive information tends to be given less weight."

In his final experiment, Chua took the concept of ambient cultural disharmony a step further by exposing participants to video clips of two people interacting in a business situation. In six scenarios, the people/individuals were from the same or a different culture and were engaged in positive (harmonious), neutral, or negative neutral interactions—six scenarios in all.

After viewing the videos, participants were given details about two cultures—a Mongolian tribe called the Ewenki and a South American population called Jivaro—and were asked to come up with innovative business ideas that could help both groups/cultures. A team of experienced entrepreneurs judged the business ideas on creativity—for example, broadband Internet, while useful, scored low on the creativity scale, while a long-lasting fuel scored high since the Ewenki had trouble gathering fuel, and the Jivaro believed fire to be sacred and should never go out.

Even after a brief exposure to situations involving people they didn't know, the participants who experienced cultural disharmony received creativity scores about 24 percent lower than those viewing the harmonious or neutral interactions. Surprisingly, Chua also found a slight drop in creativity among those who viewed the same-culture harmonious videos. He speculates that perhaps observing ingroup harmony inadvertently sends the signal that people are unwilling to step outside their comfort zone to engage with other cultures.

"When you see a lot of people of the same type clicking together, you might come to the belief that they are not receptive of people different from them—it's almost like an old boys' club situation," says Chua, though he cautions that those findings were slight compared to the much stronger effect of ambient cultural disharmony.

## **CULTURE CLASHES**

For those working in culturally diverse business environments, these experiments demonstrate the risk of bringing people from different cultural backgrounds together—and the importance of actively creating an environment that minimizes intercultural disharmony, says Chua.

"It is inevitable to have conflict when you bring people from different cultural backgrounds together," he says. "It's about how you manage the conflict. A lot of times managers try to put together a multicultural workplace without trying to integrate people better."

As Chua has shown in previous research, awareness of our own cultural biases and assumptions can go a long way toward improving creativity in multicultural situations. He speculates that managers could decrease the effects of ambient cultural disharmony by encouraging employees to identify their own assumptions of other cultures—for example, by keeping a cultural journal in which they record their thoughts and observations. In the workplace, managers can create cultural "awareness moments," as HBS Associate Professor Tsedal Neely suggests, by setting up site visits between employees working in different environments, or by encouraging them to work side by side to observe how cultural differences can influence work habits.

Managing cultural friction in this way might not only help create a more harmonious workplace overall, but also ensure that you are reaping the creative benefits of multiculturalism at its best. [WK](#)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Michael Blanding** is a staff writer for *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*.

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## COMMENTS

### ANONYMOUS

I am citing a passage from 'The Heart of Judgment' by Leslie Paul Thiele.

Leslie argues that 'judgments are developed and transformed by way of the "reflective equilibrium" established between the socially cultivated sensibilities inhabiting our guts and the theoretically formalized principles that emerge from our mouths'.

This shows us that the more you take multiculturalism into account (like mentioned in this study), the better you can make decisions.

### MARIO STASSEN UNIVERSITY LECTURER, CONSULTANT, RECUPER EXPERTISE

Very interesting article. I see a lot of similarities with own experiences. It was important but also challenging to understand before to be understood and deal with cultural myopia.

### ARLENE B. ISAACS PRESIDENT, ARLENE B. ISAACS & ASSOCIATES

Having worked with a former US Chief of Protocol early on in my career I became aware of the nuances that can sabotage your objective. In the USA we are rather "casual". Calling someone by first name here is intended to make them feel "comfortable". Instant familiarity broad is generally insulting, especially coming from someone a decade or more younger. I coach executives and entrepreneurs on: "HOW TO GET YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR AND NOT IN YOUR MOUTH!" (My weekly column in The NY Post dealt with PROFESSIONALISM IN ANY ARENA.) WWW.ARLENEBISAACS.COM

### JUDITH MCLEAN OWNER, HI Q TRAINING SYSTEMS

I like the depth of this article and will share with my trainee professionals from around the world

### KAPIL KUMAR SOPORY COMPANY SECRETARY, SMEC(INDIA) PRIVATE LIMITED

The main problem with people is that they tend to compare their culture with other cultures and find faults with the latter. They pride in their own culture and look down upon others. In my view, we need to bring forth our good practices and simultaneously adopt the good practices of others. We must have positive and happy thoughts about others in order to create harmony in our team work. Why create problems by making mountains of mole hills. If we appreciate others, they are bound to do likewise and a win-win situation will result. Empathy is a time-tested solution.

### MR.VENKATARAYALU KUMAR FLEET MANAGER, WILHELMSSEN SHIP MANAGEMENT SDN BHD KUALALUMPUR

Ambient Cultural disharmony is a prevalent situation in every company around the world. Disharmony from whatever reasons among the employees at any level will reflect on output as a whole. The company should train the employees not to apply the individual cultural beliefs at work.

Employees must be made to believe work is different from individual cultural belief and must respect every employee's cultural behaviours as reflected in work atmosphere with respect. Once the need for respecting cultural behaviour is planted and emphasized, performance road to success will face no roadblocks but flowers on either side.

**G.P.RAO. FOUNDER CHAIRMAN, SPANDAN, FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN VALUES IN MANAGEMENT AND SOCIETY, CHANDIGARH, INDIA,**

Going beyond 'awareness moments', achieving synergy between one's own national human values with those of other countries is hypothesized as an effective means of promoting organizational harmony, as also creativity. I take this opportunity to invite like minded individuals and institutions to join hands in our ongoing project cum research work on Synergy between the Indian and Western human values in management: Towards a Functionally Humane Organization. The instrument developed, Spandan Spectrum of Human Values in an Organization 2013, can appropriately be modified and used for obtaining necessary primary data. Undertaking such inter related initiatives in cross cultural management and human values is expected to contribute in its own way, among others, in minimizing cultural friction, strengthening creativity and innovation, and organizational harmony and productivity.

**HUGH QUICK HOME, NONE**

"It is a given that companies need culturally diverse teams to succeed". I don't agree, the great majority of the local companies that keep our local community going have no cultural diversity at all. I see, or think that I see what Professor Chua means but, taken literally, it is not true

**A. MAYES EDUCATOR, CENTRAL COMMUNITY SCHOOL SYSTEM**

I absolutely agree with what professor Chua has stated. Cultural disharmony in schools affect the way children are taught and how they learn. The way an individual perceives a culture also has an impact on the way a person approaches two different people with the same exact problem. The bigger problem however is that as managers, supervisors, teachers, administrators, or people in charge or over other people we fail to see that there is a problem.