

The “multicultural” team

When we sit together as Germans, Swiss, Americans, and Swedes, with many of us living, working, traveling in different places, the insights can be remarkable. But you have to force people into these situations. Mixing nationalities doesn't just happen.

Percy Barnevik, CEO and President of Asea Brown Boveri¹

Today, more and more companies are turning towards teams as a way of managing increasingly complex and dynamic environments. Teams are now seen as solutions to problems of external adaptation, responding to complexity by bringing together a variety of perspectives while responding to dynamic changes by encouraging teams to make decisions at the front line, where the action is.

Yet in order for teams to be effective, to provide successful solutions to problems of external adaptation, they need to find solutions to problems of internal integration. This means developing strategies for managing the team's primary task as well as its process. This is all the more difficult when team members hold different cultural assumptions about how teams should function.

Finding solutions to problems of internal integration requires a balance of individual and collective effort. The very idea of teams as a solution is now being promoted in highly individualist cultures, such as the United States. In fact, the use of team approaches, such as quality circles, contributed to the initial popularity of Japanese management techniques among Western managers. In other cultures, such as in eastern Europe where Communist ideology has promoted collectivism, the current emphasis is on increasing individualism, with the aim of encouraging entrepreneurship and personal initiative. Teamwork is disparaged due to its association with the old regime. Some consider it unfortunate that in the former Yugoslavia, well-known for its self-managing teams in the early 1970s, managers are not building upon or benefiting from this tradition.²

Nevertheless, teams are cropping up all over the map (as well as in cyberspace). And given the likely evolution of information and communication technologies, teams of the

future may be found anywhere and anytime. For teams to become effective solutions in an international context, there has to be an appreciation of the impact of culture on receptiveness to teams, and its impact on all the ingredients that go into making them viable. For multicultural teams to deliver on the promise of better performance through diversity, there is a need to develop culturally appropriate strategies to manage the task as well as the process.

In solving these problems of external adaptation and internal integration, teams in effect, create their own culture. Over time group members come to share behavior, values and beliefs, and assumptions which may be more or less aligned with the dominant national or corporate culture. In fact, sometimes teams are created with the express purpose of violating corporate norms, and developing a counter-culture, such as skunk works, in order to develop new business ideas.

Why multicultural teams?

Increasingly, companies are promoting the practice of employees participating in multiple teams for multiple purposes. They are setting up greater numbers of temporary and permanent work groups – project teams, task forces, steering committees, commissions, and boards – designed to formulate or implement strategies. People drawn from different functions, units, and levels within the organization and from the outside are having to learn to work together.

For example, new product development teams may not only include representatives from different functions within the organization, but also may bring in customers and suppliers from the outside. Corporations are also pooling their expertise across national boundaries in the hope that this will lead to more successful marketing to different types of customers, as well as enhancing local commitment to strategic directions and facilitating implementation. These changes are bringing together people not only with different expertise and perspectives, but also different behavior, values, and beliefs, that is, cultures: national, functional, and corporate.

As boundaries within and between companies, industries, and countries are breaking down due to the competitive pressures and globalization of business activities, teams are becoming more and more multicultural. Managers may, in fact, find themselves, simultaneously, in many teams, in many places, at many times, among many different cultures, as shown in Table 8.1.

These transnational teams can contribute to what Paul Evans refers to as the organization's "glue technology"³: encouraging cohesiveness among otherwise independent, autonomous national subsidiaries and other business and functional units. Transnational teams also create *lateral networks* which can improve communication and information flow between subsidiaries and HQ and among subsidiaries.⁴

Transnational teams provide development opportunities for the team members to understand international issues better, and to appreciate better the interdependencies between units. These teams also provide the opportunity for managers and the organization to learn how to function effectively within different cultures, be it with suppliers,

Table 8.1 Types of transnational teams**Major types of transnational teams**

1. Business development/product launch
Team members of multiple nationalities responsible for developing or launching a product which has multinational sales potential
2. Regional headquarters
Several nationalities, primarily from throughout a single region (e.g. Scandinavia, Asia Pacific), responsible for strategic coordination
3. Functional
Team members of multiple nationalities working in a particular functional area (e.g. R&D, quality assurance)
4. International joint venture
Two or more nationalities are represented in nearly equal proportions
5. Corporate headquarters
A corporate-level team composed of multiple nationalities

Source: Adapted from C.C. Snow *et al.* (1993) "Types of transnational teams", from *Transnational Teams Resources Guide*, Transnational Teams Project, sponsored by ICEDR.

customers, or employees. They send an important message to the rest of the organization, and to outsiders, regarding career opportunities, thereby facilitating recruitment of local managers with high potential. Thus there may be wider strategic reasons for creating such teams: organizational integration, organizational learning, and managerial development.

Sometimes these transnational teams are multicultural as an inevitable consequence of drawing team members from different parts of the company, and from different countries. At other times, multicultural teams are designed as a deliberate attempt to promote better decision-making, and to encourage greater creativity and innovation. The payoff of multicultural teams is presumed to be in creating richer quality of decisions.

The benefit of using multicultural teams and utilizing their inherent diversity has intuitive appeal. Given the greater complexity and speed of change in the international business environment, it seems obvious that bringing together people with different cultural backgrounds will enhance the quality of decisions taken.⁵ Given the greater uncertainty and ambiguity in decision-making, these cultural differences provide a greater range of perspectives and options. Cultural differences can also contribute to new ways of looking at old problems, creating the opportunity for greater creativity and innovation.

Multicultural groups can also help to minimize the risk of uniformity and pressures for conformity that can occur in groups where there are too many like-minded individuals.⁶ Bringing together people with different cultural backgrounds is thought to be a good antidote. However, as Percy Barnevik, President and CEO of ABB, puts it,

Multinational teams do not happen naturally – on the contrary, the human inclination is to stick to its own kind. If in selecting a manager the choice is between a compatriot

with a familiar background, and a foreigner whose credentials appear strange and whose language is difficult to understand, objective criteria tend to lose out.⁷

The very richness of this diversity makes the group dynamics much more complex. These differences can create interpersonal conflict and communication problems.⁸ There is a greater potential for frustration and dissatisfaction, which can lead to higher turnover of team members. Thus despite the appeal and logic of teams, multicultural or otherwise, effective teamwork does not happen spontaneously. Teams have to actively manage their task and process to avoid lost investment of time and resources, missed opportunities, and disappointing outcomes, as indicated by the old saying which goes, "A camel is a horse designed by a committee".

Teams have been shown in the past to either enhance or impede productivity, and this is even more true for multicultural teams. Research seems to indicate that multicultural teams tend to perform either much better or much worse than monocultural teams.⁹ Other evidence suggests that heterogeneous teams can outperform homogeneous ones.

Research conducted on group performance in the United Kingdom by Meredith Belbin indicates that teams composed of members with different profiles were more effective than teams made up of "star" performers (the best and the brightest), or with members having similar profiles. Teams which had included a mix of profiles such that there was a balance of roles performed better.¹⁰ Preliminary evidence suggests that certain cultures have preference for different roles: the French for coming up with bright ideas, the Germans for structuring the task, and the Swedes for obtaining the necessary resources.¹¹ Thus the case for bringing together people with different profiles, personal or cultural, grows stronger.

Recent research has further demonstrated that, once settled, multicultural teams performed better than monocultural ones in "identifying problem perspectives" and "generating alternatives".¹² The problem is "how to get settled" or how to arrive at a common ground. Diverse groups have to confront differences in attitudes, values, behavior, experience, background, expectations, and even language. When team members have similar profiles, there appears to be less trouble in finding "a style of operation which suits all the members".¹³

Consider the following case. Three well-known, internationally sophisticated companies – IBM, Siemens, and Toshiba – decided to form a joint venture, Triad, in order to develop a computer chip.

Siemens scientists were shocked to find Toshiba colleagues closing their eyes and seeming to sleep during meetings (a common practice for overworked Japanese managers when talk doesn't concern them). The Japanese, who normally work in big groups, found it painful to sit in small, individual offices and speak English . . . IBMers complained that the Germans plan too much and that the Japanese – who like to review ideas constantly – won't make clear decisions. Suspicions circulate that some researchers are withholding information from the group.¹⁴

The failure to address these cultural differences and to agree on task and process strategies can sabotage any group effort.¹⁵ Sue Canney Davison labels this problem, the "rush to structure".¹⁶ In an extensive study of multinational teams, she found that most newly

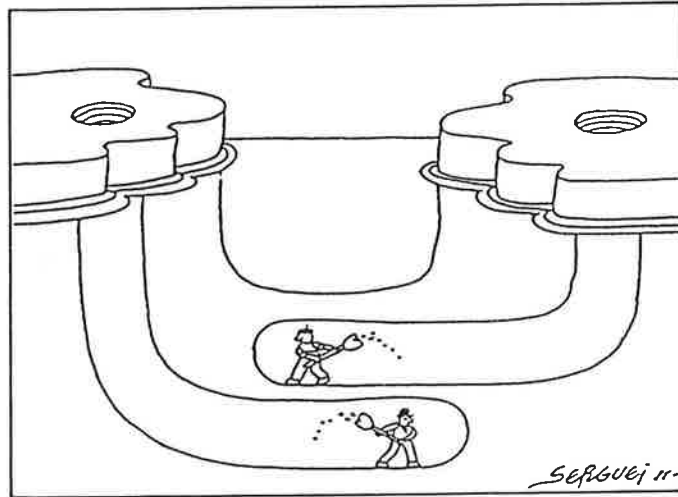


Figure 8.1 Making ends meet. (Source: *Le Monde*, 1985. Reproduced by permission of *Le Monde*; artist: Serguei.)

formed teams jumped straight into a discussion of the nuts and bolts of the task. They did not devote enough time to considering the interactive process through which the task is achieved: what patterns and style of communication are needed; how meetings are to be conducted, how relationships are built, and how decisions will be made. In neglecting to deal with these differences upfront, the teams in question were storing up problems for later on. "You have to start slowly and end faster; by starting too fast, you run the risk of not ending at all", as shown in Figure 8.1.¹⁷

Prescriptions for effective teams are easy to come by. Generally they recommend creating a common purpose, setting specific performance goals, having the right mix of skills (technical, problem-solving, and interpersonal), having the necessary external support and resources, establishing task and process strategies, and evaluating and providing feedback on team performance.¹⁸

But cultural differences are expressed in different expectations about the purpose of the team and how the team is supposed to operate. Some of these expectations are related to *task* strategies: how the task is structured, roles or who does what, and when, and how decisions will be made. Other expectations relate to *process* – team building, language, participation, ways of managing conflict, and team evaluation. These expectations have to be negotiated for both task and process. Table 8.2 below summarizes the task and process strategies, the underlying cultural assumptions, and the questions to ask in order to draw out the differences.

The purpose of Table 8.2 is not to provide a checklist or recipe but rather to stimulate discussion among team members. This framework should not be taken as comprehensive, as unsuspected cultural dimensions may well emerge en route. It does, nevertheless, provide a starting point.

The purpose of the ensuing discussion is to develop a shared strategy of how the team will work together. It provides the opportunity to surface cultural differences and to

Table 8.2 Strategies for managing multicultural teams

Task strategies	Cultural determinants
Creating a sense of purpose - What is the team's mission? How explicit should this be? - What are the team's goals and objectives? To what extent can they be measured? - Who should be a member? - What are the team's priorities? (Schedule? Budget? Quality?)	Task versus relationship Being versus doing Hierarchy Individual versus collective High versus low context Monochronic versus polychronic
Structuring the task - To what extent should agenda be structured? - To what extent should the "rules of the game" be clearly spelled out? - What needs to be accomplished? By whom? - How should time be managed? How important are deadlines? What happens if deadlines are not met? - How will work be divided? Then integrated? - What can be done together? Apart?	Uncertainty avoidance Monochronic versus polychronic High versus low context
Assigning roles and responsibilities - Who does what? Who is responsible for what? - Should a leader be assigned? Based on what criteria? Competence? Interpersonal skills? Hierarchical position? - What is the role of leader? To take decisions? Facilitate discussions? Obtain resources? - Who needs to attend meetings and when?	Individual versus collective Power and status Uncertainty and control Task versus relationship
Reaching decisions - How should decisions be made? By vote? By consensus? By compromise? - Who is expected to make the decision? The leader versus team?	Individual versus collective High versus low context Hierarchy
Process strategies	
Team building - How is trust developed? - How much time for social activities?	Task versus relationship Monochronic versus polychronic High versus low context
Choosing how to communicate - What is the working language? Who decides? - How to address imbalance in levels of fluency? - What type of communication technology can be used? - What is an effective presentation?	Power Individual versus collective High versus low context Monochronic versus polychronic
Eliciting participation - How can we ensure participation of all members? - To what extent are some members given more credibility than others? - Does it appear that the input of some members is being ignored? - Who listens to whom? - Who interrupts who?	Power Individual versus collective
Resolving conflict - How is conflict managed? Avoided? Confronted? - Who accommodates whom? Is collaboration sought? - To what extent do we compromise? Is negotiation seen as win/lose, lose/win or win/win?	Task versus relationship Power Individual versus collective
Evaluating performance - How and when to evaluate performance? - Is evaluation a two-way process? - How direct can feedback be?	High versus low context Power Individual versus collective

allow them to be discussed, rather than ignored, in the hope that they will go away. By putting cultural differences on the table rather than pushing them *under* the table, the potential problems can be anticipated and addressed and the potential opportunities can be brought to light.

Some of the cultural differences can be spotted in artifacts such as the use of titles and first or last names, the presence and form of meeting agendas, and the amount of social versus task activity engaged in. Beliefs and values elicited in these discussions indicate expectations regarding, for example, the roles of leaders and members and the structure of meetings (preferred degrees of hierarchy and formalization). Underlying assumptions regarding power, individualism, and time, among others, can then be interpreted. The rest of this chapter will explore in greater detail the different approaches to these strategies and the underlying cultural assumptions.

Task strategies

Creating a sense of purpose

One of the most important elements of successful teams is having a "shared sense of purpose". This purpose has to be developed within the team whether or not its mandate comes from on high. Often teams are formed with no clear idea of their rationale, other than it seemed like a good idea at the time. These groups quickly lose their motivation, unless able to turn the situation into one of defining their own reason for being. Yet creating a sense of shared purpose is not an easy task, particularly when first allegiances may be to functional, business, or country units. In addition, different cultures have different assumptions about the reason for teams: to share information and discuss problems, to make decisions and take actions, or to renew contact and build social relationships. This will determine issues such as the frequency of meetings and contacts, who should attend, whether the meetings can take place through conference calls or need to be face to face, and the time needed to be set aside expressly for socializing.

Take the example of an alliance among three companies, French, German, and Danish. A high-level working group met monthly to operationalize the intended goals of the alliance. The German and Danish managers came to the meetings expecting to negotiate decisions that would then be implemented. Thus they prepared seriously, arriving with a well-planned agenda, and making sure that decisions were duly noted in the minutes. They were annoyed at what they perceived as the lack of preparation, and the lack of focused discussion from their French counterparts. The French managers were in turn surprised, and amused, at the earnestness of the others. For the French, the working party was consultative; its purpose was to share information and make suggestions. Only the boss would eventually make decisions. This was never openly discussed, culminating in nine months of frustration.¹⁹

German managers are typically well-prepared for meetings, as they value technical competence and specialized expertise. British managers, given their more generalist perspective, may well have skimmed through the papers on the plane and may still be

leafing through them during the meeting. Yet this will not prevent them from offering their point of view. These differences led to problems in one joint venture between a German and a British firm, where the German managers were systematically irritated by the uninformed questions of their British counterparts during meetings. The German managers tended to refrain from making comments when they did not have the relevant knowledge and had no desire to demonstrate their lack of knowledge by asking stupid questions. The British managers did not see the need to demonstrate technical competence or expertise and took the opportunity to ask naive questions which they saw as critical to providing the broader perspective.

For those cultures with strong informal networks, what goes on at the bar, over coffee, or during lunch may be as important as what is said in meetings. The real decisions are taken outside the meeting room. Thus the purpose of the meeting may be more to encourage and to assess members' willingness to implement the decision. This is particularly frustrating to those who expect that the purpose of the meeting is to arrive at decisions, not to confirm them. This may be the case of negotiating teams where the responsibility for decision-making is diffuse, and probably lies outside the team.

The perceived purpose of the team will determine "who needs to be involved". In task-oriented cultures, only those who are directly concerned, and with the appropriate knowledge and skills will be invited. The objective is to get the job done. In cultures where hierarchy is important, members may be assigned to teams because of their power and influence in the organization, rather than their knowledge *per se*. The presence of powerful members may signal the importance attached to the team, as well as the likelihood of a decision being made. The idea of team members being drawn from more or less the same hierarchical level, so as not to have any one member pull rank, would seem like a bizarre idea.

In relationship-oriented or collectivist cultures, more members are likely to be included, regardless of whether their knowledge is relevant to the task at hand. The purpose of the team is to create a sense of belonging, to reaffirm relationships, and to reinforce identification with the group. Being left out would create malaise, as it could be experienced as social ostracism.

Creating a sense of purpose not only means agreeing on what the group is expected to accomplish overall, but also "setting specific performance goals and objectives". Given the different expectations of the purpose of teams, these goals and objectives may differ. In fact, common prescriptions for making shared purpose explicit and setting precise goals and objectives can be taken as somewhat naive, if not impossible. In high-context cultures, the sense of purpose may be more implicit. Spelling it out, clearly articulating a vision, is seen as robbing it of some of its subtlety or sophistication. Purpose or vision is experienced more as a feeling, something more intuitive, rather than concrete and tangible.

Some members expect the purpose of the team to evolve over time, and as such cannot be agreed upon upfront, nor within a particular time frame. The latter approach would be viewed as limiting flexibility and stifling creativity. This reflects different notions of time. Where a monochronic view of time prevails, task strategies can be expected to be dealt with in a sequential way, within a limited time frame. But where time is seen as polychronic, the process is likely to be far more iterative, and the purpose of the team, or

its objectives, can be revisited at any point in time. This is the problem with putting forth prescriptions, such as five steps to better team performance.

Insisting on precise performance goals and objectives may also be seen as too instrumental, too task-oriented, and insensitive to the individual member's needs, or the social needs of the group. Not enough time is devoted to relationship-building and developing a sense of rapport, including time for socializing. Furthermore, in cultures where there is low sense of control over the environment, setting performance objectives may be experienced with discomfort, as members feel that they are being held responsible for something over which they have no perceived control.

Furthermore, it is not obvious that team members share the same sense of priorities. For example, some members may feel that it is more important to achieve time deadlines, while others are more concerned with achieving higher quality despite possible delays. Constant reminders regarding cost targets may annoy those who feel that cost overruns may be necessary in order to achieve time or quality targets. These differences may be due to assumptions regarding time, as limited or expandable. It may also reflect different values regarding pragmatism, coming up with a solution that works rather than one that is "ideal".²⁰

Structuring the task

Teams also have to decide on how they will structure the task: setting agendas, when and where to have meetings, what needs to be done by when, and who needs to do what.

Setting agendas

Setting agendas is one area where cultural differences can be a source of potential confusion and friction. Indeed cultures differ in expectation as to whether an agenda is set at all, or whether the flow of the meeting should take its own course.

In Germany, the *tagesordnung*, or agenda, plays a critical role. Statements and reports have been prepared which correspond to specific items on the agenda. Thus there is great reluctance to deviate from that agenda. This created problems in an American-German joint venture, frustrating one American manager, ". . . because there are all these associated issues that are getting behind and you are not quite sure whether they will ever come back to these issues or not".²¹ This frustration was attributed to differences in the desire to reduce uncertainty, which is greater for Germans than for Americans.²²

French managers, on the other hand, do not appreciate the systematic, one agenda item at a time, approach. They tend to advance discussion on several fronts at once, and prefer to consider all the issues together, as they may well be interrelated. This is liable to frustrate American managers who see time passing and no decisions being made on any particular agenda item. They may become restless sitting through what they perceive as "endless talk", and "going round in circles".

Consider the reactions of these two expatriates in a Franco-American merger.²³

An American manager, who was visiting Paris for the first time was invited to a full-day meeting which began with a two hour presentation during which the 12 participants in the meeting spontaneously split into various sub-groups, which had separate, private

clashing conversations about the topic at hand. Occasionally, someone was loud or interesting enough to get everyone quiet and have the full group listen – but not for long. There was tremendous debate, and people loudly challenged the ideas of other people. The American was shocked by the rudeness of the group and lack of courtesy towards the consultant. Several times, the American had tried to make a point, but no one would listen. The American left the meeting feeling quite frustrated.

A French expatriate, at his first American meeting, could not believe what was taking place. The clock seemed to control everything. The meeting began exactly at the time stated; there were no side conversations, and the leader of the meeting made sure that each agenda item was discussed at the time and for the duration the agenda had specified. Decisions were made, and people accepted “action items”, the responsibility to take action based on the decisions made. For the most part, one person spoke at a time, and few ideas were challenged. One person even said, “Excuse me, please let me finish” when someone interrupted her! When it was all over, people left the room talking about what a productive meeting it had been. The French expatriate left the room feeling very confused and uncomfortable.

These reactions reveal different notions of time – monochronic or polychronic. In monochronic cultures, agenda items are expected to be dealt with systematically, decisions taken, deadlines respected, and one person speaks at a time. In polychronic cultures, rigid agendas are likely to be perceived as inhibiting creativity in meetings, deadlines serve more as guidelines than unalterable facts, and it is, on the whole, more acceptable for several people to talk at the same time without it being experienced as chaos.

These different views of time also lead to different notions of what is considered to be acceptable behavior in meetings. The polychronic manager may not instruct the secretary to hold calls or ask unscheduled visitors to wait outside. That would be inexcusably rude to friends or colleagues who are accustomed to dropping in unannounced. Similarly, polychronic managers may leave to make calls or attend to paperwork if the discussion is not immediately relevant to them. Monochronic participants get particularly irritated when meetings start late or overrun. Announcements for meetings in France often have a start-time specified but no end-time.

Another important cultural difference in setting agendas is *high* and *low context* – the degree to which things are spelled out versus inferred. German managers are often admired for their ability to structure meetings, and frequently use techniques such as Metaplan. However, they often frustrate others in their need to spell out all the details. This is also true of Americans. At an international management conference in Paris, American organizers both amused and annoyed the European audience by going over the conference sessions in detail, spelling out what was clearly already outlined in the conference program. They also went as far as to put in writing how the American participants were supposed to behave with an international audience.

Assigning roles and responsibilities

Teams also need to decide who is to do what. This means *assigning roles* and *responsibilities* within the team. In more individualistic cultures, team members often prefer a

"go it alone" approach and are eager to split up the tasks so that everyone can go off and work on their own. Later on, the different pieces are expected to be integrated through group discussion, or indeed by one person taking responsibility for pulling it all together.

In more collectivist cultures, assigning individual responsibility seems somewhat strange. They expect the work of the group to be done together, interdependently. The idea that each goes off and does their own work independently makes no sense. Thus team members from collectivist cultures, having been assigned their part may go off and do nothing, much to the frustration of their counterparts from more individualist cultures. One frustrated Swedish expatriate manager in Hungary complained that team members did not seem to realize that reaching a decision in the meeting was not enough: something had to be done between meetings.

The very fact of working in a team is more appealing to some than to others. Rugged individualists tend to feel constrained by teams and have little patience when it comes to trying to understand the other's point of view, and having to reach consensus. Furthermore, they want to be rewarded for their individual effort and resent "free riders", those members of the group that do not pull their weight.

People from collectivist societies are more used to and comfortable working in a team, do not keep accounts of who did what, and are reluctant to assert their own ideas above the others. Rewarding individuals rather than the team is seen to destroy the harmony needed to sustain working relationships. Research on Chinese, American, and Israeli managers demonstrated that managers from more individualist cultures performed better working alone, whereas those from the collectivist cultures worked better when part of a group.²⁴

The importance of taking individual initiative and personal responsibility, and being held accountable is stressed in cultures that are not only individualist, but also where there is perceived control over the environment. This is expressed in the belief that "The buck stops here", as championed by President Truman. If something goes wrong, Americans believe, they have only themselves to blame. Thus, they are often frustrated when trying to get managers from more collectivist cultures, notably in Asia or in eastern Europe, to take individual responsibility and to be held personally accountable. Why take responsibility for something over which they have no control?

When Americans readily take responsibility for an item on the agenda, for the Japanese this means that there are no mitigating circumstances. That person has to deliver, regardless. The Americans taking responsibility assume that this means giving it their best effort, but that if the situation is untenable, they expect to be absolved of that responsibility.²⁵

The roles and responsibilities of team leaders and members also differ significantly between cultures. The preferred choice of team leader is clearly influenced by different cultural assumptions. For instance, in Germany the team leader must demonstrate technical competence to have credibility. In France or Italy, the team leader is chosen based on the power and political influence he or she holds with the organization.²⁶ Many prescriptions from American gurus stress the importance of choosing a team leader with good interpersonal skills and who can serve as a facilitator, particularly warning against choosing team leaders on the basis of narrow, task-specific knowledge or hierarchical position.²⁷

In cultures where the hierarchy is important, the team leader is expected to chair the sessions and have the final word on any decisions. Latin Europeans expect strong control from the chair regarding the agenda and the discussion. French managers have difficulty believing that a group can make a decision; that is the boss's job. In more egalitarian cultures, team members may rotate chairing the meetings and decisions are expected to be arrived at through consensus. Roles and responsibilities among the members are expected to be shared. Nordic managers, for example, expect the chair to play more of a facilitation role.

In keeping with the need for structure, team leaders in Germany are expected to take a strong hand in running the meeting. Team members who signal their desire to contribute are duly noted, their names written down, and then taken in turn. In one German-American joint venture, the German participants were left feeling disoriented when the leader did not control and direct the flow. As Professor Heinz-Dieter Meyer puts it, "I have observed otherwise very articulate German managers reduced to silence in American-style meetings where the senior person did not play the orchestrating role".²⁸

In keeping with the different notions of the role of a team leader, there are also different expectations of the role of team members. These differences are particularly noticeable during brainstorming sessions which rely on speaking out, challenging authority, and participating on equal terms in decision-making. These types of behavior are difficult in cultures where respect for age, titles, or authority is the norm. The assumption that members are on equal footing just does not hold.

Reaching decisions

Culture also influences how teams decide and on what basis decisions are taken: majority rule, consensus, or compromise. Reaching decisions by voting, or majority rule, may be seen as fundamental to the democratic process wherein individual opinions are represented. Voting rests on assumptions of egalitarianism, and individualism; everyone's vote counts equally. It neglects the role of voice and silence, and of power and influence.

When asking "All those in favor? All those opposed?", Americans often assume that silence means agreement. This approach also often neglects the formation of coalitions and the subtle pressures for conformity or willingness to go along with the group. Voting also creates winners and losers which may create problems in cultures where consensus is valued and saving face is more important.

There are also different ways of looking at consensus. Consensus can be seen as a way of synthesizing divergent views or gaining compliance for adoption of the best idea. On the other hand, consensus may be seen as a way of preserving social harmony rather than necessarily ensuring task integrity. One Danish manager complained, "Danish managers would rather have a consensus than a good decision. We can all agree and we can all be wrong".

In Japan, it would be unthinkable to put forward a proposal which did not already have universal approval. The "official" meeting is not a place for discussion, but rather the place for confirming consensus. All the spadework, *Nemawashi*, takes place in advance of the meeting, to avoid conflicts which would result in loss of face for the defeated party.²⁹

However, reaching consensus may be time-consuming and does not necessarily guarantee the best solution. Research has demonstrated that better decisions are achieved through active debate among members representing conflicting alternatives.³⁰ In conflict avoiding cultures, this prescription would be difficult to follow.

Managers from the United States and Britain are likely to adopt an attitude of "let's split the difference" to satisfy individual interests. In this way they are more concerned with arriving at "what's fair" in order to promote team spirit and commitment to the solution. This may result in a compromise rather than in arriving at the best solution.

For the French, why go for a compromise if the perfect solution can be found? Decisions should be based on the best intellectual argument. Thus, compromise in Anglo cultures may be seen as a fair solution to divergent positions, but for the French it can also be interpreted as a suboptimal solution, even damaging to one's position. *Compromis* for the French signifies jeopardizing opportunities or plans.

The degree of explicitness, or high context versus low context also plays a role. In French meetings, a decision may well be made and understood, yet not be written down. Americans, who are used to a higher level of explicitness and formalization (more low context) may not recognize that any decision has been reached unless it is formally brought to the table (not "tabled" as the British would say, which for an American means postponed), voted on, and clearly noted in the minutes.

Thus multicultural groups have to actively negotiate the task strategies in order to arrive at a common approach to working together. They also have to explicitly negotiate process issues, which have more to do with the way members interact than with how the task is structured.

Process strategies

Building a team

When it comes to building teams, North American managers tend to have a more task-oriented, mechanistic view. As they see it, teams can be put together by assembling a group of individuals, setting the objective, oiling the wheels (a little socializing, some extra resources), and then expecting them to function effectively, or fixing them (exchanging parts) if they fail to do so. Team-building efforts, such as *Outward Bound*, are designed to demonstrate (to groups of rugged individualists) the need to cooperate in order to survive.

Following the merger of a British and French company, the members of the top management team flew to the middle of the Arabian desert. Upon arrival they found a jeep, a map, and a note from the president giving them one week to find their way to Riyadh. Having to survive together in the desert for one week was thought to be good preparation for planning company survival. The second week was spent in a luxury hotel, formulating strategy.³¹

Teams that perceive themselves as actively doing something together rather than coordinating information or expertise, work harder to integrate themselves and their

activities.³² However team building may create the sense of forced comradery. These efforts may be seen as manipulative, an instrumental use of relationships and may therefore backfire. These exercises may also be rejected, as they violate the line between professional and personal relationships. Thus making explicit attempts to create team identity (through artifacts such as T-shirts, slogans, and so forth) may run into resistance.

Consider the example of a French medical equipment maker, taken over by General Electric in 1988. GE decided to boost the morale of its new French employees by calling a training seminar for French and other European managers. In their hotel rooms, the company left colorful T-shirts emblazoned with the GE slogan "Go for One". A note urged the managers to wear the T-shirts "to show that you are members of the team". The French managers wore them, grudgingly, to the seminar, but as one of them recalled, ". . . forcing us to wear uniforms . . . was humiliating".³³

Team-building exercises are also designed to establish trust. Trust is thought to develop faster where teams are exposed to moderate risk and team members have to learn to rely on one another for support.³⁴ For this reason, companies will sometimes deliberately understaff transnational teams. This forces team members to cooperate in order to make up for the missing person(s).

Yet while trust is considered universally important, it is built up and sustained in different ways. Americans tend to trust first until proven wrong. For Germans the reverse is generally the case. "Americans operate by a 'extend good will unless you have reason to distrust' rule, while Germans operate by the opposite *caveat emptor* [buyer beware] rule: 'distrust until you have reason to trust'."³⁵

Americans build trust by being friendly and informal. The Germans build trust by proving competence and demonstrating technical knowledge. This may result in Germans creating various "tests". As an American project leader of an American-German joint venture described,

Now the interesting phenomenon is that of our seven or eight issues, all of which [they considered as] blocks to proceed forward, in the next meeting were never mentioned again . . . [It was a] process of checking us out. [At later meetings] a good half dozen [of] what I would call "tester red herrings" just came out of left field. Once again, about half of them I already knew the answers and knew . . . that they were not issues.³⁶

In Germany, trust is based on a person's integrity and predictability: delivering on promises, honesty, dependability, and punctuality. If a task is not going to be completed by a promised date, the deadline must be renegotiated in advance to let people make arrangements. This reflects the high task orientation. In more relationship-oriented cultures, what counts is the person's integrity and predictability in relation to other people: care, concern, and support. Furthermore, not meeting a deadline is not considered to be critical and will not necessarily lead to a loss of trust where time is more elastic (polychronic), and words and statements are taken less literally (high context).

Building trust is further complicated by problems communicating across cultures. Misunderstandings can often occur in situations where trust is low. Disagreement and suspicion may therefore be magnified out of all proportion. The misunderstanding serves as additional proof of lack of trustworthiness. There is no benefit of the doubt.

People get hung up on a word and it flies up into a huge event, and becomes a focus for all sorts of displaced anger and frustration – a bit like domestic quarrels caused by leaving the lid off the toothpaste.³⁷

Choosing how to communicate

How teams talk reveals and influences team dynamics. In her study of cross-functional teams in one US company (3M), Professor Anne Donnelon used sociolinguistics to recognize and interpret patterns in team dynamics.³⁸ She argued that teams do their work through language and that the work they do is conversation. The ways in which teams "talk" creates thoughts and feelings, enhancing or inhibiting relationships, problem-solving, and learning. "Team talk" also reveals how issues of identity, interdependence, power, social distance, conflict, and negotiation are managed. Thus being able to decipher language and communication patterns is extremely important to negotiating strategies for working together.

One of the first items to agree on is the working language. The choice of language may cause friction, especially if the team is a bicultural one, perhaps the product of a joint venture or cross-border merger. One Franco-Swedish team decided to adopt English as the working language. While this seemed like a reasonable compromise, the French managers' mastery of English was considerably weaker than that of the Swedes. Thus the French felt at a disadvantage.

Choice of language can create "winners or losers" as language dominance is often synonymous with power and influence.³⁹

A story is told of an American, whose company had been acquired, present for the first time at a meeting of the strategic committee. One board member suggests they speak in English as a courtesy to the guest. CEO changes his mind saying "Gentlemen, this meeting is going to be in Italian". It was a brutal impact. That man must have understood next to nothing . . . "Wrong, [said another manager hearing the story]. He understood that he'd been bought."⁴⁰

Teams have to guard against vesting all the power in managers from the host country, from the parent company, or in members with the same mother tongue. Assumptions of power, however, are particularly difficult to address directly and language may be used, consciously or not, as a way of keeping power. Even power-sharing discourse in dominant cultures is often undermined by subtle colonial or imperialist world-views. It is easy to talk about empowerment or bringing issues into the open as long as it is in English. The very fact that English has become the *lingua franca* of business reinforces this power issue. Thus anglophones, those most likely to preach empowerment or to favor brainstorming, tend to dominate group discussion ignoring that the differences in ability to speak English create an unequal playing field, as shown in Figure 8.2.

Efforts can be made to render the issue less emotional by insisting that the language chosen does not belong to a particular clique, but represents the best solution, given the composition of the team and the levels of fluency. At the very least, care must be taken to establish a process which addresses any imbalance created by language fluency.⁴¹



"Look, everyone here loves vanilla, right? So let's start there."

Figure 8.2 We all speak English? (Reproduced by permission of the Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate; artist: P. Steiner.)

Paul Orleman, manager of the global training and development team at Rhône-Poulenc Rorer, a French-American joint venture in pharmaceuticals, offers the following advice,⁴²

We make several rules for participants: speak slowly; ask for clarification at any point; and if anyone gets too frustrated in trying to make a point in English, the participant can revert to his or her native language and someone will translate. Though rarely used, this "native language safety valve" has proved helpful on several occasions.

Even if there is no one to translate, the switch to native language releases pressure and frustration; and other participants often learn something about the individual's "true personality". There is often an amazing transformation in body language, tone of voice, facial expression and confidence when someone switches to his/her native language.

It is also useful to summarize, paraphrase, and keep a visual record. Leaders of multicultural groups have to learn to rephrase questions in a number of ways to continuously monitor that everyone understands the same thing by what is being said and agreed. A more low-context approach may be necessary, as it cannot be assumed that people can read between the lines, or will understand the allusions and *sous-entendus* (implied meaning) of another culture.

It may even require a symbolic gesture of giving up something precious by the team leader, such as the mother tongue. This, however, is quite difficult to do, particularly as it means giving up a major source of power and a significant sense of competence. This clearly becomes more difficult in some cultures than others, for example in the United Kingdom and in France, where the sophisticated use of language is highly regarded, and taken as a sign of competence.

Aside from language fluency, patterns of language also differ. Use of silence for example is under-appreciated by Americans despite the motto, "Silence is golden". These

differences were strikingly confirmed on one international management course where executives from five nations were thrown together for five weeks (Michigan Leadership Program).⁴³ In the initial meetings, the Americans tended to jump in and grab control, while the Japanese preferred to wait and listen.

The Americans later found out that the Japanese have a saying which goes, "He who speaks first at a meeting is a dumb ass". Sobered by this implication, the Americans decided to give the Japanese more chance to talk by introducing a two-second rule: when someone else stops talking, wait two seconds before speaking to give others a chance. Furthermore, the Japanese adopted the sporting time-out signal in order to request a break for explanations when the language became too confusing.

Language facility and how free people feel to speak up or interrupt greatly affect people's participation. Japanese managers value silence and measure their words carefully before uttering them. As one Japanese MBA student put it, "The Western communication style is like a tennis match whereas the Japanese communication style is like bowling. The participants in bowling do not face one another, and can choose their own pace".⁴⁴

In southeast Asia and some Scandinavian cultures the norm is not to interrupt, but even to leave an appreciative silence between utterances. Interrupting is considered to be rude. Research comparing negotiations in Japan, United States, and Brazil found that Brazilian negotiators interrupt each other twice as often as either the Americans or the Japanese.⁴⁵

Language, or syntax, to some extent determines the possibility of interruption. For example, since English has the subject, verb, and object at the beginning of the sentence it is easier for Anglo-Saxons to interrupt one another as they can guess the ending. This is not the case for German which has the verb, tense, and necessary degree of respect all at the end of the sentence. You have to wait until the end to get the full meaning.⁴⁶

Increasingly, the issue of ongoing communication among team members involves use of technologies such as groupware, electronic and voice mail, teleconferencing, and fax machines. These technologies have significantly facilitated communication among team members in different geographic locations. Groupware enables team members to brainstorm ideas without having to meet face to face, to participate more actively, and to overcome problems related to group pressures and language difficulties. Electronic mail and faxes make time zones irrelevant, and teleconferences come close to providing the richness of face-to-face meetings. However, these technologies can never hope to capture the full range of sensory information, feelings, and context. According to one senior product development manager, "All things considered, the most effective communication, especially in the beginning of a project, is a handshake across a table to build mutual trust and confidence. Then and only then can the electronics be really effective".⁴⁷

Furthermore, these tools cannot be considered as culturally neutral and can be expected to be met with varying degrees of receptiveness. For example, communication by e-mail tends to be more direct (low context) and impersonal, without the subtlety or diplomacy, or indications of status, necessary in some cultures. As one senior British manager with ICI complained,

I hate e-mail. I think it is intrusive. I feel emotionally aggravated by it. I am a bit status conscious and e-mail is so bloody egalitarian. I suspect it is also because my surname begins with a T and I always find myself near the bottom of the list. It irritates me and it is so impersonal. It does not say, "Dear Peter, . . . Regards, so and so". It comes spitting out with some code at the front, and some code at the bottom.

Or again, consider the case of teleconferencing. According to advice given to teams by O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen in their recent book *Global Work*, "The agenda should be time-blocked with decision points clearly identified so that people will be prepared for both the allotted time per activity as well as when and how they will be asked to make a decision".⁴⁸ One can imagine that team members more from polychronic cultures might not feel comfortable with such a tightly scheduled agenda and be less disciplined about sticking to such protocols.

Embedded in the use of teleconferencing are cultural assumptions regarding trust and the nature of truth. As one German engineer with considerable experience in the use of this technology explained,

I am never sure that my colleagues at the other end will not tape me, to use my own words against me. I know it is silly, because I am not scared of being taped on the phone, but videoconferencing meetings still create many more formal commitments than a simple phone call.⁴⁹

To be useful, these technologies must be accepted by team members. Therefore, multicultural teams must discuss and negotiate which technologies will be used, as well as when and how they are to be used, while providing flexibility to take into account the cultural differences in communication.

Eliciting participation

Given differences in how language is used and in language fluency, efforts to elicit participation need specific attention. Unless a conscious effort is made to integrate the diverse contributions, the very reason for its presence is undermined and the experience only serves to reinforce the idea that diversity does not add value. Thus, some restraint of dominant members and encouragement of quieter members may well be needed. More insidious is the experience of "token" foreigners, where the individual is listened to but rarely heard, as shown in Figure 8.3.

Making sure that all members are heard, that their views are properly aired and considered requires sensitivity and courage. This is needed to identify and confront underlying differences and prejudices that exclude certain team members. This means not just listening to, but also acknowledging their contribution. Too often, the foreigner, whether the only American in a group of French managers or the only French manager in a group of Britons, feels ignored.

Sometimes cultural differences are interpreted as "personality problems". A team member may be considered difficult or sabotaging group efforts (perhaps by remaining silent or by forcefully arguing their point of view) when that person is merely responding to a different set of cultural norms. The person is then treated as a deviant and ignored, or



Figure 8.3 Speaking out. (Source: *Punch*, 8 January 1988; artist: Duncan.)

is pressured to conform, thus losing his/her potential contribution. Furthermore, in blaming the individual, one fails to critique the situation, where the dominance of one culture over the others, or the nature of the interaction, may be discouraging participation.

Meaningful participation does not mean that everyone has to speak the same amount. A person may speak only occasionally and yet regularly come up with crucial input. Meaningful participation means that everyone has helped move the team forward, in their own way. In fact, the team can define upfront the very meaning of "meaningful participation", and how to ensure it. Multicultural teams should not fall into the trap of trying to force contributions. Team members may be more comfortable discussing issues on a one-to-one basis, than bringing them forward in a team meeting.⁵⁰

In Finland, for example, many things get said in the sauna that are not said in more formal meetings. This may mean structuring meetings so that there are more opportunities for people to speak among themselves or to contribute on a more personal basis as public statements may cause discomfort. The assumption that what goes on in the meeting is all that counts, paying little attention to social occasions or corridor talk, restricts valuable input.

Using techniques such as brainstorming or teleconferencing to encourage participation may, in fact, prove counter-productive. Brainstorming works against people who do not master the language or who have different participation norms. And however difficult it is to understand other team members face to face, teleconferences will only make it worse.

One HR executive from Digital Equipment suggests distributing colored cards and asking everyone to write their ideas regarding a certain issue, such as their objectives for the team. Cards are then placed on a board, grouped by themes, and then periodically reviewed.

Resolving conflict

For teams to function effectively they need to establish mechanisms or ways of resolving conflict. This presents a problem for multicultural teams, given different norms for managing conflict. Modes of conflict resolution have been classified according to degrees of assertiveness and cooperativeness: competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding.⁵¹ While this model acknowledges differences in personal styles, cultural patterns tend to be ignored.

Gladwin and Walter⁵² recommend different modes given the situation such that the importance of the stakes involved and power should determine degree of assertiveness, while the nature of the relationship and interests will determine cooperativeness, as shown in Figure 8.4. Here, cultural dimensions are relevant in attitudes towards power, individual versus mutual gain, and in what is considered to be important (stakes).

For example, in individualist countries where power is unequally distributed, such as France, conflict is likely to be managed through *avoidance* (referred up the hierarchy) and then *confrontation*, or force. This often provokes a violent reaction or counterforce, like strikes. One French HR director insisted that the word "conflict" not be used in a seminar on managing cross-functional teams because, "Once you get to conflict there's no return. It's finished". In countries like Sweden, where power is supposed to be shared equally and where there is more concern for relationships and mutual gain, conflict is more likely to be resolved through *collaboration*.

Accommodation is likely in cultures which are relationship-oriented and where interests are perceived or defined as mutual. Also when perceived power is low, the subordinate expects (and is expected) to submit to the boss. Accommodation also rests on the notion of interdependence and mutual obligation – the need for parties to take care of

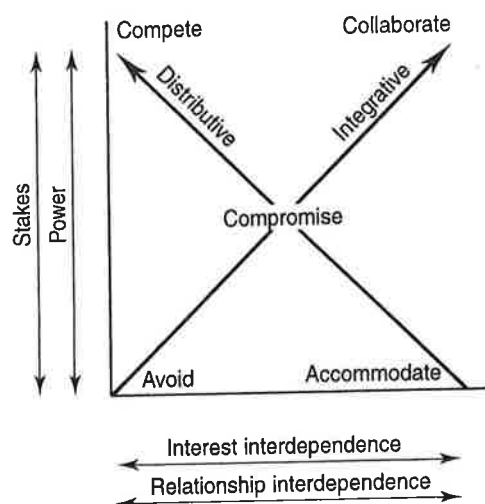


Figure 8.4 Resolving conflicts. (Source: T.N. Gladwin and I. Walter (1979) *Multinationals under Fire*, John Wiley, New York. Copyright © 1979. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons Inc.)

each other as in the case of the buyer-seller relationship in Japan where the buyer is obliged to take care of the seller (*amae*).

Avoidance of conflict, as mentioned earlier in the case of France, may also be used when power is low, where little hope for mutual gain is perceived, or where there is little interest in pursuing a relationship. Avoidance can also be a powerful tactic. In negotiations, Japanese managers know that if they keep silent long enough, the Americans will finally agree. However, avoidance is also common in countries where it is of utmost importance to maintain relationships by saving face. Japanese avoid conflict in public in order to preserve relationships as well as to maintain maximum flexibility in satisfying mutual obligations.⁵³

Thus individualist cultures are more likely to push for or assert their own ideas. The assumption is that conflict of interests is inherent in negotiations. In such cultures, negotiations are seen as a zero-sum game, with a winner and a loser (distributive versus integrative). As the "pie" (or amount of resources available) is perceived as fixed, the prime concern is to gain as much of that pie as possible. This goal takes priority over building up the relationships. Thus they put more stake in winning and therefore come to the negotiation table armed with unassailable arguments to support their case.

One research study found that in negotiations Americans were satisfied with less pie equally split, while Japanese found ways of increasing the size of the pie, but were less concerned with the idea that it should be equally shared.⁵⁴ Team members from collective cultures are more likely to look for mutual gain (integrative), to focus on building and maintaining the relationship, and to come to the table in a "humble", not assertive, posture. This should not be confused with weakness.

Avoiding rather than confronting conflict may thus preserve team harmony and the leader's authority. One team leader from India explained that due to his culture he could live with more ambiguity and did not feel the need to resolve everything at meetings. This did not go down well with American and British team members, who wanted more clarity and sense of direction. He, however, did not want to bring conflict to a head by clarifying different viewpoints and actively resolving differences. In his culture it was not polite to do so. He complained that the Americans (both women) were quite aggressive in their positions, not tolerant of other views, tended to polarize the issues, and then wanted to "fight them out". He was also fed up with the Anglo need to vote on everything. For him, ambiguity served to buffer conflict, and was his way of keeping the power in making decisions later on. This had worked for him in previous assignments in India and Mexico, where differences in power are expected and accepted.

Clearly, unresolved cultural differences can create conflict and can have a significant negative impact on the team by closing off communication channels, wasting group energy, and creating excessive amounts of turnover. But too little conflict is not necessarily a good sign either. It may mean that the cultural differences are being ignored or suppressed rather than exploited, and that minority views have succumbed to the dominant majority. This can result in complacency and the inappropriate use of routine approaches to address new problems. A certain amount of "constructive tension" is therefore desirable.

Evaluating performance

To ensure effectiveness, teams have to evaluate their progress continuously, both in terms of task and process. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide opportunities to reflect and learn as a team.⁵⁵ This requires setting aside time to evaluate how the team and its members are doing, to discuss the dynamics and resolve the differences. While not easy to do in any culture, some cultures are more prepared to give and receive feedback than others. This makes the process of evaluating performance a potential cultural minefield.

When a group or team member seems to be having problems, American managers believe in direct intervention. As they see it, problems can be put right by designing processes and providing a forum in which individuals can articulate their needs, clarify their expectations, and resolve their differences. Americans, given the heterogeneous nature of their culture, find it necessary to deal with differences by confronting them and working them out. This, incidentally, tends to be our own bias, which is more or less implicit throughout this book! In Japan, given its homogeneous nature, differences tend to be smoothed over, thus preserving harmony. Being different is a threat in Japan; in the United States it is a given, something to be managed, or overcome.

Even the boss may expect and even request constructive feedback from subordinates as well as peers, as in the practice of 360 degree feedback favored by many multinational companies, such as Pepsi International.⁵⁶ In Latin European countries which are more attached to hierarchy, such as France, the thought of the team giving feedback to the leader, and the leader accepting it, is difficult to imagine.

In Britain, where communication is less direct (more low context) than in America, critical feedback is likely to be veiled or couched in humor.⁵⁷ Thus, in a multicultural context, the message is likely to be lost. In many Asian countries, feedback is less direct still, and may occur outside the workplace altogether, certainly not in a team meeting. Differences will be dealt with in private, often through the informal network. In Japan, team members may be able to address issues while drinking together after hours.

It is necessary therefore to agree upon ways of giving feedback and discussing the group's interaction. For example, one team used three simple learning styles: red (action-oriented), green (people-oriented), and blue (ideas-oriented). This made it possible to suggest to one team member that he might like to be less red and become more green. He, being Chinese, was able to take the suggestions without losing face.⁵⁸

Multicultural teams have to find ways of describing and bringing differences to the surface in ways that are not personally threatening. Learning about cultural dimensions which are relevant to their working together provides team members with a vocabulary to talk about their differences, and a tool for understanding critical incidents within the group.

For instance, one multicultural team of MBA students, having just learned the notion of polychronic versus monochronic time (discussed above) teased an Italian student who turned up late to their next session for "being polychronic". This served to mark his "violation" of team norms without attacking him personally. Rather than getting annoyed with the particular individual, his colleagues gave him the "benefit of the doubt" by ascribing his lateness to cultural programming. However, care must be taken that

differences do not get used as excuses for justifying one's own or others' behavior, and become non-negotiable.

Reweaving differences: Joseph's coat

Multicultural teams are now a fact of organizational life. Rather than worrying about whether a multicultural team is better than a monocultural one, the focus should be on how these teams can best work together, acknowledging differences, negotiating interaction process, and reweaving the differences to create, like Joseph, "a coat of many colors".

Discussing cultural differences, however, is a high-risk activity for the team since all sorts of value-laden preferences and prejudices are exposed. This requires high levels of sensitivity, trust, and a real commitment to integration. The differences have to be identified, discussed and channeled, rather than accommodated, absorbed or ignored. Sometimes, according to one HR manager in a French-American company, this means that if these differences are truly integrated, everyone ends up feeling somewhat uncomfortable, as they have had to give up some of their taken-for-granted assumptions. High-performing transnational teams are those, however, that risk identifying their differences to create more intricate and colorful patterns of interaction.

The problem is that the differences are not always apparent or accepted. For example, while it may be readily acknowledged and accepted that marketing has a different perspective from manufacturing, differences between organizational members due to nationality, ethnicity, or gender may be less obvious or well-accepted – "After all, we all work for the same company".⁵⁹ On the other hand, cultural differences may be observed, but misinterpreted. For example, polychronic behavior (talking or doing several things simultaneously), if not understood, can be taken as "rude".

Multicultural teams must be willing to identify, and negotiate differences in expectations regarding the task strategies and the processes of interaction. The aim is not to neutralize differences, but to build on them. Embracing diversity is not the same as containing it. If differences are not recognized or discussed, they cannot be valued or utilized, and can become a handicap when we pretend that they do not exist. The promise of multicultural teams lies in *using* differences, not just living with them.

When individuals in a group share a common culture, be it national, corporate, or professional, the solutions to the problems which emerge, may be more spontaneous, requiring less conscious effort, than when members come from different cultures. Some argue that cross-functional teams are more difficult to manage than cross-national teams or that the problems in joint-venture teams are more due to corporate than national culture. Regardless of which cultural differences are in play, the solutions that evolve from the different cultural assumptions of the individual members become part of the cultural legacy of that group.

The team culture which emerges needs to preserve rather than homogenize the differences in order to reap their benefits. It makes no sense to bring together people from different backgrounds, for the very purpose of capturing differences in expertise and

perspective, and then trying to make everyone look alike, think alike, talk alike, and act alike. This is the real risk of relying on corporate culture or professional cultures to override culture differences. The issue, therefore, is not whether differences in national culture are more important than functional culture, but rather to understand what these differences *are* and to develop a team culture which builds upon them.

From her study of cross-functional teams, Donnelon concludes that,

The tension of team work occurs *within teams* as they grapple with the dilemma of how to integrate their differences, *within individuals* as they try to adjust to being team members, and *within organizations* as they shift about to make sense of, and room for, teams as a new form of professional work.⁶⁰

Managing this tension requires creating conditions of both security and challenge.⁶¹ Conditions of security refer to the need for members to feel safe in order to disclose their own ideas and opinions, and to challenge those of others. This can be helped by acknowledging differences, respecting uniqueness, recognizing competence, affirming mutual goals, and ensuring shared status.

Conditions of challenge, on the other hand, require a different set of efforts, aimed at provoking diversity. These include actively seeking out alternative views, building in a procedure for critique, and ensuring that all members participate in meaningful ways. Teams with divergent views require more time to establish working relationships and to gain confidence with the decision-making process. A supportive climate is necessary for constructive controversy.

A vital tool for achieving this is humor. Humor both fosters a sense of belonging as well as providing a channel through which individuals can challenge group norms without seriously threatening group cohesiveness. Humor serves as a means of putting the cultural differences "on the table" and making them discussable. The level of shared humor within a group therefore serves as a kind of barometer of team integration. Shared laughter is a concrete sign that a group is creating an identity for itself, and that the individuals are becoming a team. The team's independent existence is marked by the creation of its own jokes, jesters, and external "fools".

Teams reinforce their norms and values by what they laugh at. Mocking the red tape within the company or the lack of resources at their disposal, is a way for teams to forge a sense of joint purpose. Jokes based on shared experiences and setbacks are invented and become the exclusive property of the team. This kind of humor may not be very amusing to outsiders, but it is very powerful to those inside. It derives its humor from the specific relationship between the people who were there at the time. It is, in fact, meaningful only to them. This creates a sense of community. "If team members have reached a high level of emotional security and can laugh, joke, question and play devil's advocate with each other while completing the task, then they have done well."⁶²

Successful multicultural teams are those which have found ways of integrating the contribution of their members, and have learned to find solutions that add value *due* to their diversity not in spite of it. They have also learned to have fun, to experience the discovery of cultural differences as opportunities for surprise, learning, and shared laughter.

Questions to ask

Task strategies

What is the purpose, process, and timing of meetings?
To what extent does the mission need to be made clear and explicit?
Is it more important to achieve cost targets or are cost overruns OK given time/quality targets?
What does "on time" mean?
What is the priority of time?
What are the importance and priority of deadlines?
Is it more important to achieve time deadlines, or to delay for higher quality?
What do we do about missed commitments?
To what extent does the agenda need to be clearly structured and followed?
To what extent do the rules of the game need to be spelled out?
To what extent do roles and responsibilities need to be formalized and written?
Who needs to attend, when?
What is the role of the leader? Of team members?
How will the tasks be divided up and then integrated?
What work can be done together or apart?
What technologies can be used (videoconferencing, e-mail)?
What is an effective presentation?
What is needed to be convincing: facts and figures, philosophy, feelings?
How will information be passed? To whom? When? Formally or informally? Within the team or outside?
How, where and when do we make decisions? Consensus, majority rule, compromise?

Process strategies

How will we manage relationships – dive right into business versus take time to socialize?
To what extent will we socialize together, and when?
What is trust and how is it earned?
How will we address people? First/last name? Titles?
How formal or informal will we be?
What language(s) will we use?
How will differences in language fluency be managed?
To what extent does participation reflect potential contributions?
Who dominates?
Who listens to whom?
Who talks to whom?
How are interruptions managed?
How is conflict managed? Forcing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, compromising?
How is negotiation viewed? Win/lose, or win/win?
How is feedback provided? Face to face, third party, direct?

Suggestions for managers

- Ask each team member: For you, what are the characteristics of an effective team? An ineffective team?
- Build a "code of conduct" or "team charter" which defines task and process guidelines.
- Periodically assess "reality" against the charter.
- Use a facilitator who can debrief re: levels of participation, domination, approach to conflict.
- To ensure participation, use diverse approaches: Metaplan, paired discussions, round robin/round-table discussions (asking for input from each participant).
- Prepare/provide a written cultural brief, summarizing aspects of each culture represented on the team.
- Use scientific method (e.g. TQM tools) for pro-con analysis, problem definition.
- Ask each team member to identify a surprise they have experienced working with another culture, a challenge and how they resolved it.
- Provide training for the team in cultural dimensions which gives a framework and language for discussing differences.
- After a meeting, ask participants from each culture how the meeting would have been different if all participants were from their own culture.
- Ask each person to describe their "vision of success" for the team. What will the output be? What will the process for producing it look like?

Source: Paul Orleman, HR manager, Rhône-Poulenc Rorer

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