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Abstract: This report reviews current academic literature on team building. Cross-cultural communications and international culture and business. IT presents ten recommendations to assist cross-cultural teams perform to their level of possibilities.

Ten Ways to Create More Productive Cross-cultural Teams

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Table of Contents

Preface	3
Abstract	3
Introduction	3
Number 10 ñ Establish Clear And Specific Goals	5
Number 9 ñ Learn The Different Cultural Traits Of Your Teammates	6
Number 8 ñ Overcome Resistance To Cross-Cultural Teams	7
Number 7 ñ Train Your Team	8
Number 6 ñ Resolve Conflicts	8
Number 5 ñ Beware Of Harmony	8
Number 4 ñ Beware Of Parochialism	9
Number 3 ñ Understand Culture	10
Number 2 - Always Remember Communications	11
Number 1 ñ Walk a Mile in the Other Person's Moccasins	12
Conclusion	13
Bibliography	14

Preface

Our team decided to use an unusual format based on David Letterman's Top Ten list to report our findings. First done on an impulse, we discovered that this approach provided our team a solid structure that eased the sharing of responsibilities for the report.

Abstract

This report reviews current academic literature on team building, cross-cultural communications and international culture and business. It presents ten recommendations to assist cross-cultural teams perform to their level of possibilities.

Introduction--Why Cross Cultural Communications And Teamwork?

Cross-cultural communications and teamwork is becoming increasingly important in business and society. It is vitally important for achieving high performance results. A narrow view of cross-cultural communications is something that must only be done when working overseas in foreign cultures. A broader view of cross-cultural communications would extend to teams wherever cultural diversity exists.

- In American schools, there is no longer a white, Anglo Saxon population. In some schools, the majority of students are from Spanish speaking cultures. A failure to understand and appreciate each other's culture reduces the potential of the students, increases tensions and, in some cases, reinforces prejudices.
- In colleges, like Portland State for example, there are students from many cultures. In the Engineering Management Program there are students and alumni from more than 30 countries. With Engineering Management Program's requirement for team projects, it is essential for the students to understand cross-cultural communications and teamwork to perform to their potential.
- Today, American factories deal with a wide range of cultures. For example, there are workers whose mother tongue is Spanish, or Chinese (various dialects), Thai, Vietnamese, India, and many others. To operate successfully these factories have to understand and perform excellent cross-cultural communications and teamwork.

The challenge is not just for Americans to improve their understanding of cross-cultural communications and teamwork. Effective cross cultural communications and teamwork demands the participants get actively involved in the training, learning and applications of cross cultural communications and teamwork skills.

Number Ten

Establish Clear and Specific Goals

An important element in creating a successful cross-cultural team is clear and specific goals. Goals are the foundation for the team's performance. Without clear specific goals, a team does not know where it is headed. Research shows that there is a strong relationship between clear specific goals and team performance [12].

Setting goals for a cross-cultural team is much more difficult than with teams from the same culture. With cross-cultural teams, each of the team members has a different background. They can easily perceive the process and the content of group goals much differently. Erez and Somech researched cross-cultural teams and found that teams with clear and specific goals are more likely to attain high performance [7].

Erez and Somech created cross-cultural teams with a mixture of collectivism and individualism. They found that setting clear and specific goals guided team members to do their jobs efficiently towards accomplishing their goals.

Goals arrange a standard of evaluation and create relations between performance and outcomes. Erez and Somech observed that each of the teams achieved higher performance when they have group goals than when they didn't have group goals. Clarity and specific goals were required for every team.

Haasen studied an Opel Eisenach GMBH car factory, a joint venture between West German Opel and East German Eisenach. The cultures between West and East Germany are very different [8]. Haasen analyzed how these two different cultures were able to work as a productive team.

Haasen found that setting common goals and clear communications accounted for a large part of the transformation.

Opel established a clear goal of becoming the market leader in East Germany. To accomplish this, they knew they had to create a team environment. Haasen says, "Opel relied on front line people to decide on details of the manufacturing process, based on their experience with the job. Management's role changed to one of coach and advisor, assisting in moments of difficulty. Open communications and frank dialogue became key to this new environment."

Haasen cited two lessons. First is the "surprising level of work motivation created by giving people full control over their jobs and letting them organize their workplace to reach the highest possible degree of overall efficiency."

"The other lesson is the importance of learning, of continuous skill acquisition. Opel Eisenach is a perfect example of a learning organization. Learning promotes worker flexibility and leads to improvements and innovation as well. It keeps people alert and adaptive to upcoming changes."

Haasen reported significant results--160,000 cars produced in 1995, a 20% increase over 1994.

Number Nine **Learn The Different Cultural Traits Of Your Teammates**

A common mistake in cross-cultural teams that leads to miscommunication is assuming there is strong similarity between your cultural and your teammates. Kirkman and Shapiro [10] label this "projected similarity" which means "the belief that people are more similar to oneself than they actually are." The concept of "projected similarity" comes from people not understanding their own cultural or others. The belief that someone believes as you do can leave much unsaid and assumed.

For example, Americans assume that silence in a group discussion is an indication of agreement to the group's decision. This is not true for many cultures. In Japan for example, silence indicates that the topic is open to discussion at future times. The Americans think agreement has been reached, while the Japanese understand that much more discussion is necessary. This leads to great frustration because an issue is assumed to be closed by one party and is reopened by another. This can lead feelings by one cultural that nothing is getting accomplished and the other cultural feels decisions are being made without them. This tension corrodes team effectiveness.

One way to reduce this problem is to openly recognize the existence of cultural differences. Taking time in the beginning of group formation to bring these differences out in the open and develop methods for dealing with the differences aids group effectiveness significantly.

Number Eight **Overcome Resistance To Cross Cultural Teams**

To understand the resistance to cross cultural teams we should first understand some general cultural types. Kirkman and Shapiro defined three cultural types similar to what has been covered in our Communications and Team building class [10]. Knowing generally what cultural types resist teams can be useful to managers and team members.

High Power Distance	Low Power Distance
A large power gap between management and employees	A small power gap between management and employees
<u>Countries like:</u> France, Philippines, Venezuela, India, Japan and Malaysia	<u>Countries like:</u> Israel, Denmark, and the USA
<u>Traits:</u> Employees are not empowered to make decisions, this would be going around the boss.	<u>Traits:</u> Takes responsibility and action in order to get work done.
<u>Teams:</u> Does not function well in teams, especially self-managed teams.	<u>Teams:</u> Teams have less resistance in low power distance than high power distance.

Doing Oriented	Being Oriented
-Doing orientation. Defined as doing and acting on a set goals	-Being orientation. Defined as working to live, not living to work.
<u>Countries like:</u> USA, <u>Traits:</u> Stresses the importance of achievements and hard work over many other aspects of life. Strong belief in goal setting. <u>Teams:</u> Teams work well.	<u>Countries like:</u> Mexico, Malaysia <u>Traits:</u> Resistant to goal setting and large workloads that interfere with family and social life. <u>Teams:</u> Can resist teams.

Determinism	Free will
-Determinist culture. Defined as feeling there your destiny is controlled by other forces, not your own.	- Defined by feeling in control of ones own destiny
<u>Countries like</u> Malaysia, Indonesia, Many of the Arab States. <u>Traits:</u> When something happens its 'Gods will'. Do not try to set standards if they feel they cannot change the outcome. <u>Teams:</u> Resist teams without guidance by others.	<u>Countries like:</u> USA, Canada, Australia <u>Traits:</u> Tries to change the environment and control it. Believes outcomes can be changed. <u>Teams:</u> Feels teams can do what is necessary to achieve goals.

Collectivism	Individualism
-Collectivists societies. Defined as people value the group welfare more than self-welfare.	- Defined by feeling in control of ones own destiny
<u>Countries like:</u> China, South Korea, and Sweden <u>Traits:</u> High group identity, group acceptance important. <u>Teams:</u> High identification with team and team concept.	<u>Countries like:</u> USA <u>Traits:</u> Higher incidents of social loafing, individual achievements greater importance than groups. <u>Teams:</u> Resists teams, preferred individual work to teamwork.

Number Seven **Train Your Team**

Working in teams is a challenge, a difficult challenge. Some teams perform significantly better than other teams. Cross-cultural teams often do not perform as well as same culture teams according to Maznevski and DiStefano [13]. Knowing that same cultural teams outperform cross-cultural teams does not mean abandoning cross-cultural team. Even if it was possible to abandon cross-cultural teams, and in many cases it is not possible, there are ways to improve a cross-cultural team's performance.

Research shows that team training can improve team performance. Maznevski and DiStefano gave specialize training to cross-cultural teams and their performance in some areas improved. Training in the following areas helped team performance most: effective communication, agreement on group behavior, and conflict resolution.

Effective communications is defined in Daly's [4] Harvard Business Review article as "that team members hear what is said as it was intended." In both cross-cultural and same cultural teams communication is the key to understanding and performing. Training in communication between cultural groups can not only help in miscommunications but can aid in team performance.

Agreement on group behavior or norms establishes a shared understanding of accepted behavior. What is acceptable in one cultural may not be in another and by setting rules that all can agree with and follow leaves more time to focus on teamwork.

Conflict resolution team training is important because disagreements are bound to happen within teams. Training should focus on keeping the issue separate from the person and not letting the conflict become personal.

Maznevski and DiStefano [13] noted that "training had a positive effect on process and outcome variables." Some of the evaluation criteria were "how satisfied participants felt with the process and will they were to work on a team again." The first criterion is not really as compelling as the authors lead us to believe. Is it really important to feel "satisfied" with team performance, or is it how well the team performed? The second criterion is useful because having willing team subjects has been tested to be an important part of team performance.

Don't disregard or avoid cross-cultural teams rather take time to provide the necessary training to remove stumbling blocks to their performance.

Number Six Resolve Conflicts

Unresolved conflicts can rip teams apart. The challenge is to develop effective ways to resolve the cross-cultural conflict. One way to try to avoid conflicts is by hiding them under the table. This can be even more harmful than letting the conflict continue openly unchecked. A preferred solution is to decide how to resolve conflicts before they arise. Once conflict has happened it is often too late to positively resolve the problem, because people are guarding their turf and tempers are high.

The following is a list of conflict strategy:

- Set up conflict resolution rules during the first meeting. These rules can be the team's decision-making rules.
- Allow open discussion of the issues without personal attacks.
- Allow for differences on non-vital issues.
- Poll members who are usually silent for opinions.
- Don't allow two-team member to argue, try to channel them to positive solution.
- Get group support for decisions even if there was disagreement. Closure of an issue is important for the team to move on to new business.
- Take a break if things get hot to allow the issue to be in front not personalities.
- Provide a mediator to explain issues to make sure both sides are communicating.

Number Five Beware Harmony!

In a television interview with Bill Moyers in the 1980's, the management guru Peter Drucker warned that society should "beware charisma." Drucker declared that charismatic leaders are deceitful and destructive [6]. This contrasts with the conventional view that charismatic leaders are highly desirable.

Drucker pointed out that the three most charismatic leaders of the 20th century, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao were responsible for killing millions and millions of people.

Drucker stated that performance is required of effective leaders, not charisma.

We believe a similar thing can be said about harmony. While it's popular to think that harmony is necessary to have an effective cross-cultural team, this can be wrong. The most important attribute a cross cultural team is **performance**. Without performance, there is nothing.

Bert Desmond saw this when he was transferred into a team while working for Hewlett-Packard in Colorado. The team was performing poorly—the sales force had given the team low grades in the last year. The group supported the sales force in apparently harmonious way such as telling the sales force what they wanted to

hear about a product rather than telling them the sad story of what was really happening.

Bert found the team spent considerable time going to lunches once a week to celebrate birthday's etc. They spent little time addressing the problems with the sales force. The team was in denial. Bert found it very frustrating, and perhaps out of his outspoken frustration, he became manager of the group. In a couple of months the group had transformed itself with no change in personnel. Bert introduced simple changes. Group luncheons for birthdays were canceled. This was replaced with celebrations for accomplishments based on feedback from the sales force. The group followed a new policy when talking with the sales force. The group would tell the sales force what they needed to hear rather than what they wanted to hear. The sales force responded well to this high integrity policy. While they were not thrilled with the information, they had the knowledge to effectively help the customer.

The bottom line is by focusing on performance well before harmony, a cross-cultural team has the opportunity to be effective. Avoiding bad news to keep difficult issues hidden is a recipe for disaster.

Number Four **Beware Parochialism**

The Chinese character for China is two symbols. One is a horizontal rectangle and the other is a vertical line drawn through the center of the rectangle. This represents, "middle of the earth." When the Chinese people see the symbol for their country, they see it as a representation of China being the center of the world.

This is a non-American example of parochialism. However, Americans suffer from subconscious parochialism that harms the effectiveness of teams and the ability of an organization to perform up to it's capabilities.

Maryann Keller, in her book, *Rude Awakening, The Rise, Fall, and Struggle for Recovery of General Motors*, describes General Motors parochialism [9]. Here is how one frustrated, GM executive described the parochialism:

"After Honda announced its first factory in the United States, I suggested that the people in the World Wide Product Planning Group should be looking at the impending invasion, because if Honda is coming, then others are going to come. The response I was met with was, 'Oh, don't worry about those little yellow Japs. They will never make a go of it in the United States. They are going to have to contend with high costs and they are going to have to contend with the UAW, and it's simply not going to work.'"

Parochialism, or the belief that your own culture is superior to others, is deadly to effective cross-cultural teams. Americans are stereotypical viewed as naïve and parochial because few have visited other cultures, and they have a deeply held belief that the American way is the best way.

Number Three **Understand the Different Cultures**

There are many definitions of "culture." For example, Lanchman, Nedd and Hinings [11] describe culture as "a system of meaning or the collective mental programming of a social group in order to articulate its effect on specific organization structures." DiBella defines culture "as a set of assumption, value and artifacts whose shared meaning can be acquired by member of a group." [5]. From both of these meanings of culture, it is clear that people in groups create culture. A team consisting of members from different cultures has its own culture. When team members understand each others cultures then they adapt and create a new culture. For example, at NUMMI, "we discovered that the company's transformation stemmed largely from its ability to create a new 'third' culture, a hybrid of the best of its American and Japanese parentage." [16]

Today, the world is moving towards becoming borderless. Today's world is more open then ever before.

Because of global commerce, most countries deal actively with other countries. However, each country has its own culture, which influences on the thoughts and behavior the people in the country. When one does business with people from a different country, it is vital that each party knows or understands the others' culture.

Negotiation styles and approaches differ between cultures [15]. As a result, misunderstanding can happen when people are not conscious of their own cultures and the culture of the other party. There are two basic cultural types that can help to gain a better understanding about people's behavior.

1. Collectivism

Behavior of collectivist people like group harmony, interdependence obliging and avoiding conflict resolution. Such cultures are China [15] and Japan [3].

2. Individualism

Individualist people tend to believe in individual rights, independence, self - achievement, and individual self - worth [14].

As a result, people of collectivist and individualist have opposite styles of thinking and an idea of how to work with people who have different styles of thinking and different ideas of how to work with people who are from different cultures.

In our team, Pen Num, we have two Americans and one Thai. We work together as team. We work on understanding the differences between our cultures so we understand more about each other's behavior. This is, we believe, one of the reason our team has been so effective in accomplishing its goals. As Tse, Francis and Walls "found that being from different culture does not place one in a disadvantageous position in negotiation", if there is understanding among the team members.

Number Two

Always Remember Communications

Communication problems always occur with teams, especially, cross-cultural teams. Adler, and Graham [2] grouped the "cross-cultural communication problem into four categories:

- Language and language behavior
- Nonverbal behavior
- Values
- Pattern of thought

The point is the more cultures are different, the more communication is difficult. While language misunderstanding often happens, Adler and Graham say it is easy to correct because "language is a system which can be studied."

Our team concluded that when working with cross-cultural teams, it would be good to establish language ground rules where (in America) everyone would use simple vocabulary and speak slowly.

Nonverbal behavior is an important part of communications in a cross-cultural team. One team member can do something that would be very natural in his culture and insulting in the other person's culture. For example, American men view shaking hands as an expression of greeting. However, in some Asian cultures, shaking hands with a woman would be considered inappropriate because men and women do not touch each other publicly.

"Values and attitudes are attributable to national cultures" so they vary by cultures [1]. For example, the way that Americans communicate is very direct. "They ask direct questions and expect direct answers." [3] By contrast, the way that Japanese communicate is indirect. Japanese respond "with vagueness and periods of silence." As a result, when Americans and Japanese work together, there might be misunderstandings.

Pattern of thought depend on how one thinks. Some like to make decisions by using "logical, analytical and impersonal information" such as Americans and Canadians [Abramson, 1996 #11]. Someone like to make decisions by concerning with "human aspect of problems" and attuning to "personal and group values" such as Japanese [1]. When people are in the same team, they should adjust themselves to their team. It might be decrease problem of communications.

As NUMMI, which is a joint venture between Toyota and General Motors, the most important tools that brought NUMMI to be successful is communication.

Unless you mix them well, the oil and water will never become dressing.

NUMMI is like a small bowl - a big one would never work - and communication is the way to mix them. It takes a while to mix them to make a good dressing [16]. The way of communication is very important to cross-cultural teams. Teams need to have communication opening

Number One
Walk a Mile in the Other Person's Moccasins

Two quotations reflect the essence of effective cross-cultural teamwork. Interestingly enough they both come from Native American cultures.

First, "Don't judge a person unless you have walked a mile in their moccasins." To us, this describes the important attribute of empathy in good cross-cultural teamwork. When each of the team members are consciously, and continuously learning the perspective of the other cultures in the team, they have made tremendous progress on being an effective team.

The second quotation is a bit longer. Bert found it in 1994 reading a brochure on Mt. Sitka Community College, Sitka Alaska. It's attributed to an Inuit tribe.

Tell me I forget.

Show me I remember.

Involve me I understand.

This reflects the requirement of involvement by all team members to create a successful team. Without involvement, there is little chance of creating a powerful team.

Bert created a mirror image of this that addresses the roll of the audience.

Listen and you'll forget.

Look and you'll remember.

Involve yourself and you'll understand.

We believe that these two sayings go a long way in describing what the essence of good cross-cultural communications is.

Closing

There are two types of chemical reactions, exothermic ones and endothermic ones. Exothermic reactions create enough heat and pressure for the reaction to continue with no other force. Endothermic ones require the continuous application of heat and pressure to proceed. Effective cross-cultural communications is like an endothermic reaction because it requires conscious diligence to keep on target.

The driving force in creating a successful interdisciplinary team is communicate, communicate, communicate.

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