

Multicultural Team Success: The Secret Recipe

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Contents

Introduction	1
Communication.....	1
Time & Timeliness.....	3
Conflict	4
Age Diversity	6
Conclusion.....	7
References	8

Introduction

Cultural diversity, present in multicultural teams, can have both negative and positive effects on the performance and interaction of the team. The diversity comes from different cultural backgrounds present in the team. For instance, people raised in the Midwest of the United States have a shared culture and beliefs that can be different from someone raised in Europe. Culturally homogenous groups tend to be more comfortable interacting with each other. On the other hand, diverse teams might not feel as comfortable, but have the potential to bring new ways of thinking. This challenges people to step out of the box, which usually leads to new ideas, new processes, new services, and new products. When establishing a team it is important to have a variation in internal factors: age, race and gender; as well as external factors: different backgrounds, educational experiences and political ideologies. This brings opportunity for the team to be more effective by developing new ideas and better problem solving.

Yet, building a multicultural team is never easy, especially when you have never experienced it, or when you don't have ideas about how to handle it. For these reasons, we will give out a few major guidelines while discussing important factors in the process of being part of a multi-cultural team. But first, it is necessary to talk about the cultural background. Indeed, every culture has its customs, and most of all, they each have particular collective values. Actually, these values have been separated in six variables called "variations in value orientations". The six variables are: relationship to the environment, time orientation, nature of people, activity orientation, focus on responsibility and orientation to space [1]. This is the base of the "Silent Language" concept. "The Silent Language shows how cultural factors influence the individual behind his back, without his knowledge" [2]. It is very important to acknowledge the existence of such differences in perspective within team members of a multi-cultural team, due to this cultural background. Those variations of perception, or culture types, create gaps between culture variables. Identifying and understanding them are crucial to selecting the best approach possible, in order to dramatically diminish their negative effects.

It is essential to know the different cultural backgrounds, and the challenges they imply, for a good start. Then, it is important to be familiar with other fundamental dimensions of a multi-cultural team. This paper will talk about a selection of judicious practices concerning the opportunities and challenges related to communication, time, conflict (avoidance & resolution) and age differences in a team. Thus, to accomplish the purpose of this paper, we will discuss these dimensions. We will explain them, give out their advantages, explore the risks they involve and recommend a set of guidelines to overcome the difficulties.

Communication

Communication is a crucial aspect within any team, especially in a multicultural team where it can be a real complicated challenge. It is often an area of difficulty even for peers who speak the same native language. For example, native English speakers can have difficulty communicating when the individuals are coming from different English-speaking countries[3]. Compounding the complexity with people from different cultures, different languages, and with different communication rules can dramatically increase the risk of

damaging team cohesion. With these facts in mind, it is important to find ways to mitigate risks and capitalize on opportunities. We are going to see the benefits of a multicultural team in this aspect, the most frequent errors and how to avoid them, and then we will recommend some “ground rules” to improve overall communication within multicultural teams.

Indeed, at first glance it might be hard to see communication advantages in multicultural teams, but there are some and they are not negligible. For example, multicultural teams promote the sharing of information and experiences, as well as assisting in the dissemination of methodologies adopted by organizations [4]. Ensuring that all the team members share knowledge allows them to access a wide range of information and helps everyone keep their work up-to-date and of high quality. It makes sure that everyone remains focused on the same goals and objectives. The experience learned from others is also one of the benefits; Chen says: “One of the most common reasons for global teams is to leverage the knowledge and skills of diverse team members” [4]. In skilled tasks, a team with diverse skills will generally outperform teams that lack certain skills or are unable to coordinate them successfully.

Moreover, multicultural communication promotes continuous improvement. Due to their different language, and by fear of miscomprehension, multicultural teams often question each other more than homogenous groups. In addition, not only the organization (and the team of course) is affected, but also the clients. Studies have shown that multicultural communication encourages team work and helps increase flexibility and responsiveness.

This is a glimpse of the many benefits multicultural communication can offer. You may not find all of them in every multicultural team because some are specific to certain environments. Others may arise in particular circumstances, while some will not. Nevertheless, it shows that multicultural communication is important.

Many communication challenges can arise throughout the development of a multicultural team. One of the primary and preliminary challenges is finding a common language. Choosing a common language that you can use for group communications helps set the stage for the interactions that will take place over the lifetime of the team. Non-verbal communications can also be a problem. We do not usually think about our body language, which leads to the mistake of underestimating it. Body language varies considerably from one culture to another. For example, a high level of eye contact is considered a sign of attentiveness in some cultures and a sign of rudeness in others. So, take time to get to know people and find out the correct information.

Minor mistakes like the mispronunciation of someone’s name, or whether the written document you have put together is going to be understood, can be avoided by asking questions early; it can save awkwardness later. To emphasize on this point, I think it is important to underline the importance of written communication. From one culture to another, a wild range of rules exists. The best is to set some ground rules about it and again, to discover what to do by sharing culture. It is impossible to remember all of the differences in customs and cultures but at least remember a few of the most important ones. Again, this list is not exhaustive; it is only an outlook of what can get in the way of communication in a multicultural team. Depending on your situation, many others can occur but always make sure to take time to understand others’ cultural background. This will help you to find your way through and close the gaps that might interfere.

Guidelines for communication in a multicultural team can be an endless list if we attempt to cover everything. Nevertheless, there are few things that can be considered as general “commandments”.

- Keep it simple; always keep in mind the lack of common language. To counter this setback, use lingua franca as much as you can.
- Share information: open up about your own culture; learn your colleagues’ different cultural backgrounds. A better understanding of each other’s background will break down barriers, encourage confidence, build trust and in the end, improve communication [5].
- It is important to remember the issues of communication: The receiver, not the sender, defines communication. Keep in mind basic communication rules. Don’t expect someone to interpret your body language. Let people know how you feel by verbally explaining it [6].

The key is taking time to review and reflect [6]. Being aware of multicultural differences and in particular our own attitudes, behaviors and biases is essential for effective communication. The main guideline is: When you communicate cross-culturally, make particular efforts to keep your communication clear, simple and unambiguous.

Time & Timeliness

A significant area of potential difference between cultures is in the perception of time, scheduling, and timeliness. Some cultures view meeting times as guidelines, with an understanding that the real purpose of the meeting will not get started for a while after the stated “start time”. Other cultures see a published schedule as a definitive start time and would consider it a disrespect if the meeting is not started promptly. This is one example where the importance of building understanding across cultural boundaries is very important. The theme of time, schedule, and timeliness can affect multicultural teams in many other ways as well.

Another situation where individuals may differ is in the decision of how to spend meeting time. Opinions range from “nobody leaves till the work is done” to “Communicate status, assign next tasks, and then adjourn” [7]. The first concept is more of a collaborative environment, the second is one where the real work gets done individually, only meeting to keep the group informed of progress. In these scenarios, there are positives and negatives to both extremes on the scale. A goal in multicultural team management is to understand the way team members prefer to work, and adjust the expectations to create an environment that will work best for the team as a whole.

As a project and team progresses, there will be times of concentrated effort, and times when external factors limit the amount of work that can be done. The way teams manage planning and deadlines can greatly impact the levels of stress that the team members carry. Some people prefer to work steadily over long periods of time with lots of planning and oversight. Others like to concentrate efforts closer to the deadline, and work under pressure [7]. It is clear to see how a difference in the ideas about the pace of progress could create serious rifts between individuals in a multicultural team.

All of the above scenarios can be considered areas of Administrative, or Procedural conflict [7]. These issues, if unmitigated, have a very damaging effect on the unity of a team. Feelings of disrespect, wasted time, and worry over deadlines are very disruptive to the trust and synergy needed to create a high performing team. It is very important during the team forming process to have a clearly defined and agreed upon outline for how these issues will be handled. Knowing what management expects is the first step in devising individual work plans for team members.

Other areas of conflict have to do with the way deadlines are set and met. First is the discussion of what is early, on-time, and late [7]. From some viewpoints, work done early could have implications that priorities may be misaligned, not enough work assigned, or the task was completed half-heartedly. Given a deadline of Friday, some cultures may expect the work done by Thursday morning, while others would expect it no earlier than Close of Business on Friday. Finally, a designation of late is not always a bad thing, and is often expected. The severity of timeliness issues is usually related to the urgency of the overall goal, and the dependencies between the tasks.

A significant challenge exists when creating and agreeing to timelines for a team goal in a multicultural environment. There can be a broad difference in time orientation between cultures. Some may perceive an appropriate timeline of a month, while others may consider the same task to be a yearlong project. Consequences of this disagreement may be severe because of measurable and tangible costs at stake. Often, these misunderstandings can lead to resentment, and individuals feeling that the others have unreasonable expectations, or that they are working too slowly or inefficiently. This can cause anger and severe disruption to the group because reputation, status, and personal goals can hang in the balance [7].

In these situations, it is important for the team to attempt to adapt. Adaptation would mean that the team recognizes that it cannot change culturally based time structures like siestas, holidays, and vacations [7]. However, an adapting team learns to understand and work around these differences while still maintaining integrity. If this adaptation is impossible, the manager must intervene to make a final decision regarding how long work should take, and where time should be spent. In all cases, the challenge is to “harmoniously merge different practices without favoring one over another” [7].

Guidelines for managing perceptions of time and timeliness among team members are mostly related to clear communication up front. Setting expectations early on can save confusion and conflict down the road. These guidelines include:

- Build understanding to know what to expect from teammates in advance
- Set ground rules for meeting expectations and agendas
- Be clear about deadlines and quality expectations
- Take advantage of the benefits of diverse scheduling needs!

Conflict

Conflict, as part of human nature, is an intrinsic part of our relationships. When multiple people are working together, it is inevitable that sooner or later there would be some sort of conflict, multicultural teams are no exception to this. Before we dwell in the subtleties of conflict in multicultural teams, we should clarify what we mean by conflict. K. W. Thomas

defined conflict as “the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about”[8]. The only thing to note in this definition is the lack of consideration in terms of involvement of culture in the reasons and development of conflicts; it doesn’t imply that with correct mediation a conflict can turn into a satisfactory outcome for all parties.

Different cultures will observe and deal with conflicts in different ways due to many different factors. Lather et al [9] listed the following factors as taking part in how different people deal with conflict – gender, self-concept, expectations, situations, position, power, practice, communication skills, life experiences, values or the culture in which we have been born and brought up in. So for effective conflict resolution it is important to take into consideration the relevant cultural values of the individuals.

Stella et al [10] went a step further into defining these cultural parameters and linked them to well-known cultural variables that have been extensively studied [9] [10]. When related to a multicultural team, as a member or a leader, it is important to have these variables and their significance always present.

First parameter to understand is the effect of context within our conflict, this context is cultural, and can be either high or low. Western cultures are low context oriented and they put strong value on the conversation and the specifics of what is being discussed. High context cultures rely more on the situation and the message that is already understood as part of the context. Japanese culture is a great example of high context cultures where the language is highly dependent on the context being understood by all participants in order to communicate effectively. For conflict interactions we need to understand that high context individuals tend to use indirect verbal negotiation and subtle communications while low context individuals use a more direct style and intentional communication.

D. Milosevic defines the second parameter, individualism or collectivism, which we should understand well for effective conflict maneuvering [1]. In individualist cultures, such as American culture, there is a tendency for taking care of oneself before the group, while the collectivism approach gives more importance to the group over the individual. Stella et al exemplified a collectivist individual as “typically use qualifiers, tag questions, disclaimers, tangential response, and indirect requests to make a point”, while an individualistic personality uses direct communication and reasoning on the specific subject to justify the point [10].

Perception of positions — superiority, inferiority, and equalitarian: Certain cultures reinforce an equalitarian approach in relationships while others rely on individual status and superiority of one over the other. Intrinsic in the development of the American culture is the equalitarian idea, where freedom of speech and individual rights are engrained in the culture. Other cultures practice other status roles where hierarchical structures are present and strictly followed. In an equalitarian society people are able to challenge any individual even if they are at a higher position than themselves. In non-equalitarian cultures, the challenge of superiors might be an unthinkable thing to do.

Understanding these parameters is a key necessity for an effective conflict resolution. Being an effective negotiator and mediating conflicts successfully might not be an easy task. The following recommendations will certainly be helpful when confronted with conflict situations.

- Understand how the previous cultural parameters affects oneself. Dr. Najafbagyis [11] defines the importance of first understanding our own culture, rights and attitudes towards other people for an effective conflict resolution.
- Effective communication with emphasis on appropriate and respectful approaches towards other styles of communications. Try different communication approaches to convey a different point of view, counter-questions or conditional statements work well.
- Emphasize full-listening during your encounters, not only during verbal communications but also on non-verbal communication.
- Show mutual respect and avoid labeling cultures or individuals for not sharing the same values. Successful conflict mediation and resolution are based on reciprocal goodwill, honesty and respect.

Age Diversity

Age groups have different work ethics and ways of communication, which can create some conflicts. Different age groups within a team can help by balancing between good knowledge and fresh new ideas. The older members will have a lot of experience in the field and working with teams, which helps get started. They also have the following core values: dedication, hard work, sacrifice, respect, conformity, patience, duty before pleasure and obedience to rules [12]. It has been seen that more mature members have difficulty multitasking as they are less comfortable using technology and need more time understanding the material, but they are also willing to learn more once they become comfortable. It is harder to change the way an older adult thinks, so this can be time consuming. They also tend to be more responsible and have higher attendance.

The younger members bring fresh ideas, enthusiasm, and are more in touch with what is happening in the world at the moment. Younger members usually show respect to the opinions of older members, especially when these have experience in the field and a good educational background. Younger members have some core values as well that differ from the older generation, such as: thinking globally, fun, informality, self-reliance, techno-literacy, optimism, confidence, achievement and balance [12].

Lack of age diversity can lead to uninspired ideas, stagnation, and inflexibility. If a team is formed by just older members, especially when it comes to technology development, they might encounter a point where new ideas don't emerge easily. This can happen because they are not in touch with the latest technology or to what the next steps should be. Also, after working for so long in an area, sometimes comfort levels get in the way of creativity. On the other hand, having a team formed by very young members, who have just recently graduated from college is not very wise because they lack the expertise to successfully navigate toward the right processes. In terms of age diversity, here are some guidelines for success:

- Having more experienced members in combination with younger members is important for a successful team.
- Lack of age variety can cause stagnation, in case of older members, and disorientation in case of younger folks.

Conclusion

The diversity inherent in a multicultural team offers both benefits and challenges. The benefits can serve to increase the quality of the work produced, while the challenges require special attention and effort to overcome. We have discussed 5 areas where a variety of cultural backgrounds can have a specific impact on the functionality of a team. These areas include Communication, Time, Conflict, and Age.

Diversity in culture affects team communication in both positive and challenging ways. The benefits include an increase in questioning, encouragement, and increased individual flexibility and responsiveness. It is important however to be aware of one's body language, and to not rely on it. Differences in verbal languages can increase frustration and reduce patience. In all these communication challenges, it is important to reach a common ground early, and set the stage for success.

Time considerations can also create challenges. People from different cultures can have different definitions about some very fundamental things like what it means to be late, and how time should be spent. Coming to terms with and being very clear about expectations can help to mitigate some of these issues. A place where diversity in time orientation can help is with scheduling around cultural holidays and customs. Some individuals will be unavailable at times that individuals from other cultures will be willing to work.

Cross cultural conflict is one of those areas that can cover a lot of topics. In fact, the previously discussed areas can be a source of this conflict. It is important to realize that conflict is inevitable, and is often the source of progress. Cultures can differ in the way they view conflict. Some cultures have a High or Low context viewpoint. This means they either view the situation, as in the case of a low context viewpoint, with a direct and short term cause and effect concept. High context viewpoints tend to see the long trends toward conflict, and the complexity surrounding the issues. Another place where cultures differ is in their individualism or collectivism. In conflict, individuals from some cultures will take a defensive or self-promoting stance, while other cultures will look after the harmony of the group first. The final conflict consideration is in the equality orientation. Whether team members see status as a title only, or a true hierarchy can determine how the individual will react to conflict.

Lastly, age diversity is shown to have an effect on interactions and productivity of a team. Having age variation helps create a balance between good knowledge and fresh ideas. It also increases the experience and energy available in a team. Homogenizing a team on one end of the age scale would starve the group from a much needed aspect only available from the other side. There is a common theme in most of the guidelines for effectively navigating a multicultural team. This theme is taking the time to understand the culture of your teammates. Understanding where others are coming from can help to reduce frustration and can increase empathy and the willingness of all to work together to find a solution.

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