

Cross Cultural Teamwork

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When people come from different countries, it is fun to discuss differences in foods, music, dress, and words. There are also big differences in things that people think are right and wrong, rude and polite.

But there are also interesting and useful differences in the ways that people think and work together.

Conflict Resolution

To effectively handle conflict about a problem without people getting mad at each other is the most important thing about making teams work.

Some cultures are more comfortable about engaging in conflict, and someone from a culture that always brings conflicts out in the open may be astonished when someone from another culture thinks they are rude and even cruel.

The biggest trick to accomplishing that is to talk to each other about teamwork, how everyone is feeling about conflicts, and how to make it better. It also helps to know that even before people start to try to resolve a conflict, different cultures have three different ways to resolve conflicts:

- z ASK THE BOSS.** In many cultures, there is someone whose decision must be followed. Whatever the chosen person says is true, even if it does not make sense to anybody else.
- z FOLLOW THE PROCESS.** Some have processes to calculate or determine the answer for each type of question, and the answer that process provides is followed without question, no matter how it affects the people involved
- z TAKE CARE OF EVERYBODY.** People from these cultures feel that everybody should get some good out of the conflict, even if it conflicts with the boss, or it violates the “rules” in some way.

So it is very useful to have a discussion before you start resolving conflicts about what you mean by a right answer. It is also important to realize that in many conflicts, both sides are right and the task is not to choose, but to find a decision that best serves the needs of all stakeholders.

Cultural Values

One of the more interesting writers about cultural differences in thinking and values is Geert Hofstede, who gathered data from a large number of people with similar jobs in the same company, but who represented most of the cultures of the world. He found that cultures differed in four main ways, although more recent work to include Chinese managers have led to a fifth factor.

The chart of countries shows the numbers for each country on each style, on a scale from 1 (low) to 100 (high). Note that since we are discussing the average, the central tendency for each culture, there are many individuals in any one culture who are closer to the average of another culture.

Power Distance

Some people are more comfortable with hierarchy and authority relationships. In countries such as Malaysia and Guatemala, people find it normal for someone to have a great deal more power than they do. In countries at the other end of the spectrum, such as Israel and Austria, it is very uncomfortable to have anyone in authority over you. The United States scores 40 out of 100, leaning toward less acceptance of authoritarian relationships.

Individualism/Collectivism

Ties are weaker between members of more individualist societies such as the United States and Australia. Each person is expected to take care of

themselves and not rely upon others. In more collectivist societies like Ecuador and Guatemala, people have strong ties with family, village, society, etc. and success of the whole is far more important than the success of any one member.

Uncertainty Avoidance

People differ in the degree to which they feel threatened by uncertainty. Those from cultures high in uncertainty avoidance, like Portugal and Greece, take strong steps to increase predictability, often with written and unwritten rules everyone must follow. Those low in uncertainty avoidance, such as Singapore and Jamaica are should be more comfortable with change, even when they cannot reliably predict the results of the change. The United States scores 46 out of 100.

Masculine/Feminine

This factor has nothing to do with sexual preference. Hofstede has labeled as masculine those cultures in which there is a strong distinction between the strong male task role and the nurturing female role, such as Japan and Austria. He has labeled as feminine those societies in which men and women are equally willing to be strong and nurturing. such as Norway and Sweden. The United States leans more toward the masculine at 62 out of 100.

Time Horizon

In his more recent writings, as Hofstede has been exploring the fit of these factors to the Chinese and other Asian cultures not included in his original sample, he is looking at a dimension he discusses in terms of Confucian values, but which basically related to the idea that some people tend to consider only the immediate impact of ideas and decisions, while others look far into the future. This dimension matches the work of Elliott Jaques who found that good managers are expected to look further to the future than their subordinates.

Leading Multi-Cultural Teams

In many ways the different kinds of thinking which need to go together for good problem solving match the different cultural values. It might seem that the solution is to select the right cultures for each team. But of course, the real issue is what styles they can adapt together deliberately. Lets all be Jamaican for some brainstorming, now be Austrian for idea evaluation, etc.

Teams need to be led to the best sequence of activities, but different cultures have different ways to select the one to be accepted as a leader. Team members need to develop personal trust in each other, because they have no way to evaluate the expertise of experts in other fields. However, the process of trust building can differ by culture. So it seems critical for anyone attempting to lead deliberate creativity by teams that they have an understanding of the ways that team members differ.

It is also important to understand both the effects and the anchors of various methods, and be prepared to design and use methods with different effects and anchors with people whose styles are different. For example brainstorming can be seen as a process that engages people high in power distance and avoidance of uncertainty and gets them to treat all team members as equals (low power distance) and to list all ideas for later judgment (low avoidance of uncertainty). It is less likely to have a positive impact on people who have already explored the ideas that available to those low in power distance and low in uncertainty avoidance.

It is probably even more useful if the team members understand the issues and differences so that they can make adjustments to each others perspectives and values. When team members understand and are able to discuss their differences in style, culture, and personality, it becomes possible for each team member to participate more effectively in each different aspect of the creative and problem solving processes.