

Culture and Deliberate Team Creativity

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There is an interesting similarity between culture related differences in thinking and the techniques used to guide teams to deliberate creativity. It is as if we guide them to more effective thinking by having them think more like one culture, then more like another culture, then another, until a complete and effective solution is developed. This article looks at some cultural differences, relates them to some specific techniques of deliberate creativity, and discuss various implications for teams, especially those whose members represent different cultures.

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.

Note that these are not types, but rather ranges across which people are positioned, with different averages for each culture. 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 far more comfortable with change, even when they cannot reliably predict the results of the change. The United States leans toward the low end, scoring an index of 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 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 with an index of 62 out of 100.

Time Horizon

In his more recent writings, Hofstede has been exploring the fit of these factors to the Chinese and other Asian cultures not included in his original sample. In addition to the four factors mentioned above, he is looking at a dimension he discusses in terms of Confucian values, but which seems strongly similar to the time horizon factor of Elliott Jaques. Some people tend to consider only the immediate impact of ideas and decisions, while others look far into the future. Jaques has found that generally, the higher a person is in an organization, the further they are looking into the

future. It is obvious that cultures also differ in their focus on the future. Some only consider today, while others consider generations far into the future.

Brainstorming as a Culture Shift

Alex Osborn was an advertising executive who noticed that junior people with interesting ideas were not saying them in the meetings. He realized that the usual meeting environment discouraged people from both flexibility and fluency, so he designed a meeting environment called brainstorming to get the creative ideas out for discussion.

He realized that people kept silence because of their fear of the opinions and criticisms of others. With Osborn's four basic rules, groups were able to work together and generate 50 to 500 ideas in five minutes. His groups were so productive that no secretary could keep up, so sessions were tape recorded and typed transcripts given to those attending for later evaluation.

Osborn's brainstorming technique can be seen first as a call to reduce people's avoidance of uncertainty. They were encouraged to contribute ideas of which they were not certain. It was also as a request for people to reduce their power distance. You were encouraged to contribute ideas which conflicted with those of your boss and those of people with more credentials in a discipline.

When people are taught to solve problems in teams, they are often encouraged to define the problem in broader terms, considering who else might be affected (being more collective) and how it might affect the future (extending the time horizon). Also, a great many techniques of "facilitation" of team creativity are more of a nurturing type, affecting the social and emotional interactions of the team members. In strongly masculine cultures, these are decidedly feminine issues.

It is important to note that the brainstorming only works on people who need it. Its success depends on the team members' acceptance of the power distance of the facilitator; on the certainty given by the guarantee to judge the ideas very carefully later; by the individual goal of generating ideas high in quantity and diversity. The kind of people we label as "creative" rarely follow the rules of brainstorming. They judge constantly, refuse to listen to the facilitator, etc. Like judo, the best facilitation techniques use the energy of the tendency they are trying to overcome to beat it.

American Style Problem Solving?

It may be fair to say that most of the techniques used for team leadership and deliberate creativity are attempts to shift, at least temporarily, away from the more usual American style. They seek to reduce the power distance, decrease the avoidance of uncertainty, extend the time horizon, take a more collective view of success, and utilize the nurturing skills of a "feminine" society.

How effective are the techniques with people from cultures that are already different from the American style? It may be that they are already "creative," or it may be that creativity actually lies in exploring the areas outside one's habitual thinking. So maybe creativity for a Jamaican is to be a little less tolerant of uncertainty, etc.

Leading Multi-Cultural Teams

If the different types of thinking and discussion which make up effective problem solving are similar to cultural differences, it would 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.

It seems likely that people of different cultures will react differently to the various components of facilitation and leadership attempts. Some will love one part of the process, others will love another. However, if the techniques rely upon American cultural habits for their power, these methods are unlikely to be effective with those of different habits.

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 that you 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.

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.