

Topic 4.1: Cultural Diversity at Work

1. Global Workplaces

While the world is advancing in the era of globalization, the business world is taking a step beyond its domestic borders to expand businesses abroad. Business in general are concentrating on the geocentric approach to attract the best qualified person to do the job. This changed approach gives potential talents the chance to experience and deal with different opportunities and make the most out of their skills. People are starting to come out of their own environment and accept jobs abroad, expecting to learn and grow in their professional careers. As multinational corporations become increasingly dominant in the corporate sector, the prevailing cultures within organizations are disappearing, giving way to a cultural diversity that accepts individuals of different cultural backgrounds. Popular organizations, including major corporations such as Apple, Microsoft, Google and other large companies, are addressing diversity in the workplace with the aim of reaping the benefits. Diversity in the workplace has contributed to realising the potential of diversity and helped these organizations to grow and prosper in the business world (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, pp. 79-80).

Cultural diversity, currently seen as a major advantage, can quickly become a huge obstacle if not managed properly. Although cultural diversity encompasses individual differences of age, gender, race, ethnicity, value systems and personality, it also holds unexpected challenges. These difficulties may include the fact that a cultural conflict, compounded by different value systems, hampers the entire working environment and disrupts workplace synergy (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 80).

2. Cross-Cultural Conflicts

Intercultural conflicts can be described as socio-cultural and ethnic disparities that can arise in the course of an intercultural interaction. They reflect a confrontation between two conflicting parties and are usually accompanied by negative emotions towards the members of another cultural group (Hurn and Tomalin, 2013; Weaver, 2001). Cultural conflicts are about the expectations of an individual, i.e. when an individual's expectations regarding a certain behaviour are not met by people from different cultural backgrounds (Grewe, 2005). It becomes difficult to resolve a conflict that is reflected in politics. In general, it can be said that a conflict is a confrontation or divergence of interests. This can be illustrated by two widely used approaches. The first approach defines conflict as a clash of parties, opinions, strengths, etc. (Avruch, Black and Scimecca, 1998). The second approach, on the other hand, understands conflict as a clash of opposing goals, interests, attitudes and world views of opponents or subjects of interaction. Conflicts are inevitable and occur daily in business organizations (Weaver, 2001).

3. Causes of cross-cultural conflicts

A conflict arises when opposing personalities and different interests of the involved parties clash. Conflicts can be caused by divergent value systems, ethical values, different attitudes of people, norms and rituals they follow. Individual needs vary from person to person, they differ according to the goals and interests they pursue and are based on the perception of themselves and others. However, common issues with different goals and points of view often lead to disagreement between individuals and groups or organizations. Cross-cultural conflicts that exist between different cultures can be caused by several reasons, such as differences in language and perception. For example, a common conflict between Asian and Western Cultures is the attitude towards language. While Asians see the attempt to learn their national language as a form of respect, people from Western cultures consider English as universal language in an international business world (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, pp. 81-82). The researchers DuPraw and Axner (1997) have identified six main causes of cross-cultural conflicts.

3.1 Different communication styles

The way people communicate differs from culture to culture. The use of language, certain words and phrases vary according to social norms and acceptance. The degree of importance attached to non-verbal communication, including facial expressions and gestures as well as seating arrangements, personal space and the urgency of time, can also increase cross-cultural misunderstandings (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 83).

3.2 Different attitudes towards conflicts

The way in which conflict is perceived by individuals varies from one culture to another, with some seeing conflict as positive, while others treat it as something negative that should be avoided. Most people in Eastern countries regard open conflicts as inappropriate and perceive them as embarrassing and humiliating. They prefer to resolve differences in silence. Written exchanges are the preferred method of conflict resolution. In contrast, residents of Western countries such as the USA are often motivated to deal directly with conflicts that arise. Personal encounters are appreciated in order to solve problems (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 83).

3.3 Different approaches to completing tasks

The way in which people perform tasks varies in different cultures. Key factors include differences in access to resources, individual assessments of incentives linked to task completion, different time frames and different views on task orientation and the development of working relationships. In terms of working together on a task, cultural differences play a significant role in deciding whether to build relationships before cooperating. This means that people from different cultural backgrounds have different approaches to building relationships and completing a task (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 83).

3.4 Different decision-making styles

The decision-making styles of individuals differ from culture to culture. In the US, for example, responsibility for a particular task is often delegated from high-ranking employees to a subordinate, thus fast decision making is practiced. In India, for instance, the responsibility for

decision-making lies mainly with the superior and great emphasis is placed on hierarchy. If decisions are to be made in a group of people, majority voting is a common approach in the US, while in Japan, more emphasis is placed on the consensus approach. Individuals' expectations of their own role in shaping a decision can be influenced by their cultural context (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 84).

3.5 Different attitudes towards disclosure

All cultures have different approaches to the disclosure of information. Some are open enough to talk about their emotions, while others are more reluctant to talk about the causes of a conflict or argument or other personal information. It is important to be careful when dealing with conflict and to be aware that people may differ in what they are willing to share. Things that seem natural to you - for example, why a conflict arose and who was involved in it - can seem intrusive to others. The differences between cultures and different attitudes to information disclosure need to be examined before any comments are made about people based on personal views and experiences (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 84).

3.6 Different approaches to knowing

In terms of epistemologies - i.e. the means by which people acquire knowledge - there are remarkable differences between various cultures. For example, the epistemologies of Asian cultures tend to place more emphasis on the relevance of knowledge gained through the pursuit of transcendence, while African cultures tend to rely more on symbolic images and rhythms as ways of conveying knowledge. In contrast, European cultures focus more on cognitive means to gain knowledge, such as counting and measuring (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 84).

4. Implications for cross-cultural conflict management

If cross-cultural conflicts are not properly managed, they can lead to serious consequences for the organization. “Managing cultural conflict in your organization not only creates a more harmonious workplace. It also ensures that you reap the creative benefits of multiculturalism” (Blanding, 2013). Intercultural diversity is the reality of today's world, where people from different cultures with different goals and expectations are working together. On the one hand, intercultural diversity creates a talent pool that increases the profitability and overall growth of businesses. On the other hand, organizations that are able to embrace their diversity by recognizing cultural differences benefit from their talent team by applying cooperative conflict management styles. Otherwise, when managing their multicultural workforce, they face difficult situations that lead to conflicts and negatively affect the motivation level of their employees (Chaudhary and Yadav, 2018, p. 84).

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