Topic 4.2: Multicultural Teams

1. Challenges and potentials of multicultural teams

Multicultural teams are an increasingly common form of work. On the one hand, since the degree of consensus in such teams is small, they initially spend a lot of time agreeing on common standards of task handling and interaction. On the other hand, multicultural working groups hold a number of considerable opportunities. Multicultural teams are often the result of strategic management decisions, in order to consider different regional interests in a multinational corporation or to ensure the acceptance of work results in different target countries. The international composition of teams can also be the result of recruiting highly specialized experts or reflecting the existing cultural diversity among employees (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, pp. 1-2).

1.1 Challenges of multicultural teams

International teams have to face several challenges (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 2):

Verbal communication is only ensured by a working language with varying degrees of fluency.

Central values that shape the working environment, such as personal responsibility, competition, ability and acceptance of criticism, group harmony or (in-)formality of contacts are not shared consensually.

The understanding of team roles. The concerning leadership behaviour is often contradictory, for example.

Different working styles, for instance in terms of problem-solving strategies, dealing with time or managing meetings, must first be recognized and then coordinated.

1.2 Opportunities of multicultural teams

On the other hand, multicultural teams offer a wide range of opportunities (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, pp. 2-3):

The different culturally determined working styles and communication habits can be reflected in productive ways or even create innovative forms of collaboration.

A certain degree of independence from culture-specific rules and standards offers scope for new forms of communication and cooperation.

The professionally successful and socially satisfying cooperation in a multicultural team can be transferred as a working model to the interaction between members of the involved cultural groups in the organizational environment (see figure 1).
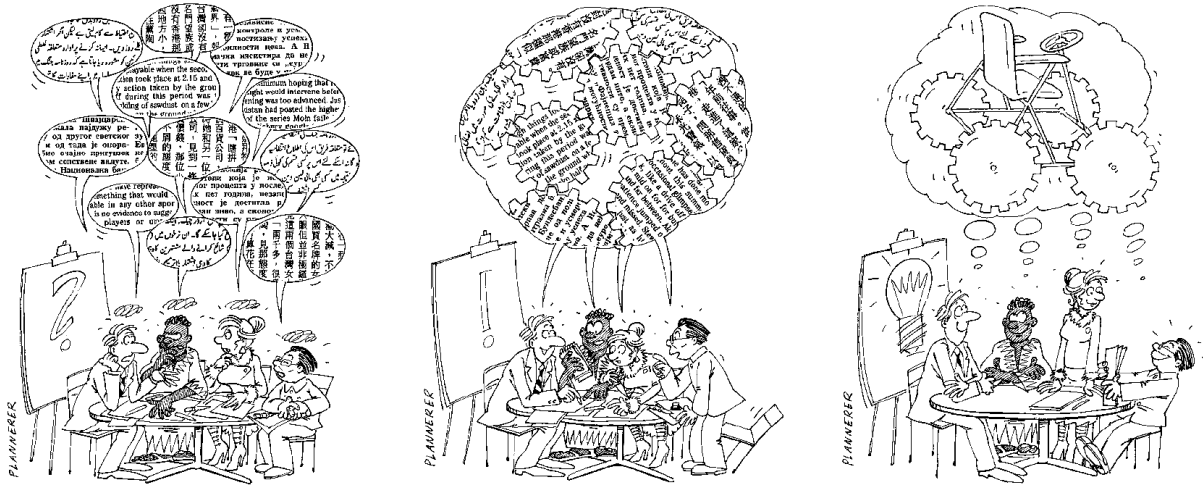

Figure 1: The basic idea of culture-synergistic cooperation
Source: Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 2

2. Conditions promoting effective multicultural teamwork

The following information is based on a research project of the psychological institute of the University of Regensburg, Germany, in which, among other things, possibilities for promoting effective teamwork between employees from different cultural backgrounds in working or project groups were investigated. During this research project several interviews were conducted with speakers from the field of international HR and Team Development, with coordinators and heads of international teams in companies, and with independent, internationally operating team trainers and consultants (Tjitra, 2001 as cited in Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, pp. 3-5).

Effective intercultural team cooperation should be actively facilitated - either by a team member and/or with support from an external coach. Intercultural synergy should not only be understood as a possible result of effective team cooperation, but also as a continuous process requiring self-referential skills within the team in order to maintain and develop it. Culturally determined strengths and differences need to be made more visible to team coordinators, team leaders and team members to ensure effective and mutually stimulating cooperation.

2.1 Basic principles and general conditions

First, the idea of international cooperation and multicultural diversity should be incorporated into the company's policy and self-image. Regarding multicultural team cooperation, perspectives beyond the current project should be defined (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 4).

2.2 External relations

The higher management should acknowledge the team, for example by attending the kick-off meeting. Contact with team members abroad should be maintained by the corresponding headquarters and the hosting business environment should show interest in the different team members and their culture and give them positive feedback (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 4).

2.3 Team organization

The definition of tasks and objectives must be clarified early and carefully in order to ensure effective teamwork. In addition, space for personal acquaintance and informal contacts should be created. To strengthen the mutual understanding and intercultural competence between the team members, a mediator or coach with background knowledge of the cultures involved could attend the initial team meetings. Further important components of team organization are balanced power and influence relations between the subgroups in the team and the joint elaboration of concrete rules for team cooperation (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 4).

2.4 Group dynamics

Within the group, members should mutually recognize and value their professional and social skills. Generally, confrontation is more important than toleration and withdrawal, since addressing potential conflicts at an early stage avoids further disagreements and misunderstandings. Recreational activities with the possibility of involving family members and partners also have a positive effect on the group dynamics within the team. In terms of effective cooperation, central working terms should be clarified through translation and retranslation. Moreover, the group must be given time and space to discover, explore and appreciate deeper commonalities, such as values and lifestyles. A deep satisfaction with the group process and its work results increases the motivation and pioneering spirit of the team members (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 4).

2.5 Personal skills

The individual members of a multicultural team should be familiar with cultural and geographical diversity in general and with the cultures of the other team members in particular. In addition, they should be aware of their own cultural standards in order to better understand other cultures. Good listening skills, empathy, willingness to learn and curiosity about different views and behaviours are also important prerequisites for succeeding in a multicultural team (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 4).

3. Barriers to effective multicultural teamwork

In the above-mentioned research project on promoting effective teamwork between employees with different cultural backgrounds not only positive conditions but also negative factors hindering effective multicultural teamwork were examined (Tjitra, 2001 as cited in Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, pp. 3-5). These negative factors can be divided into problem-causing conditions and cooperation problems within the team.

3.1 Problem-causing conditions

Conditions causing problems are, for example, time pressure as a result of a lack of preparation and linguistic communication difficulties. Other parameters that negatively affect multicultural teamwork are power differences between the involved partners due to socio-economic differences or a dominant corporate headquarters or parent company (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 5).

3.2 Cooperation problems

Cooperation problems caused by those involved in and around the team itself can usually be traced back (regarding the evaluation of the research project) to one of the three following mistakes (Zeutschel and Thomas, 2004, p. 5):

(1) The assumption that cultural differences are negligible because all team members have received a similar training despite different national backgrounds (or all people are the same anyway) and because the common professional task is in the foreground.

(2) To endure differences in behavior or attitude within the team of fear of permanently disturbing group peace when addressing the associated disturbances.

(3) Not considering the cooperation process and the group climate, often with the argument that there is no time or human resources for such psychological issues.

4. SWOT Analysis of multicultural teams

Multicultural teams must be composed intentionally and in a structured way. Goals and tasks must be aligned with the strengths and weaknesses of such teams, and only when the opportunities exceed the risks it makes sense to form teams that are specifically ethnically and culturally diverse. The following SWOT analysis shows which aspects need to be taken into account, although it should be noted that the assessment and allocation of these aspects often depends on the situation (Noé-Nordberg, 2019):
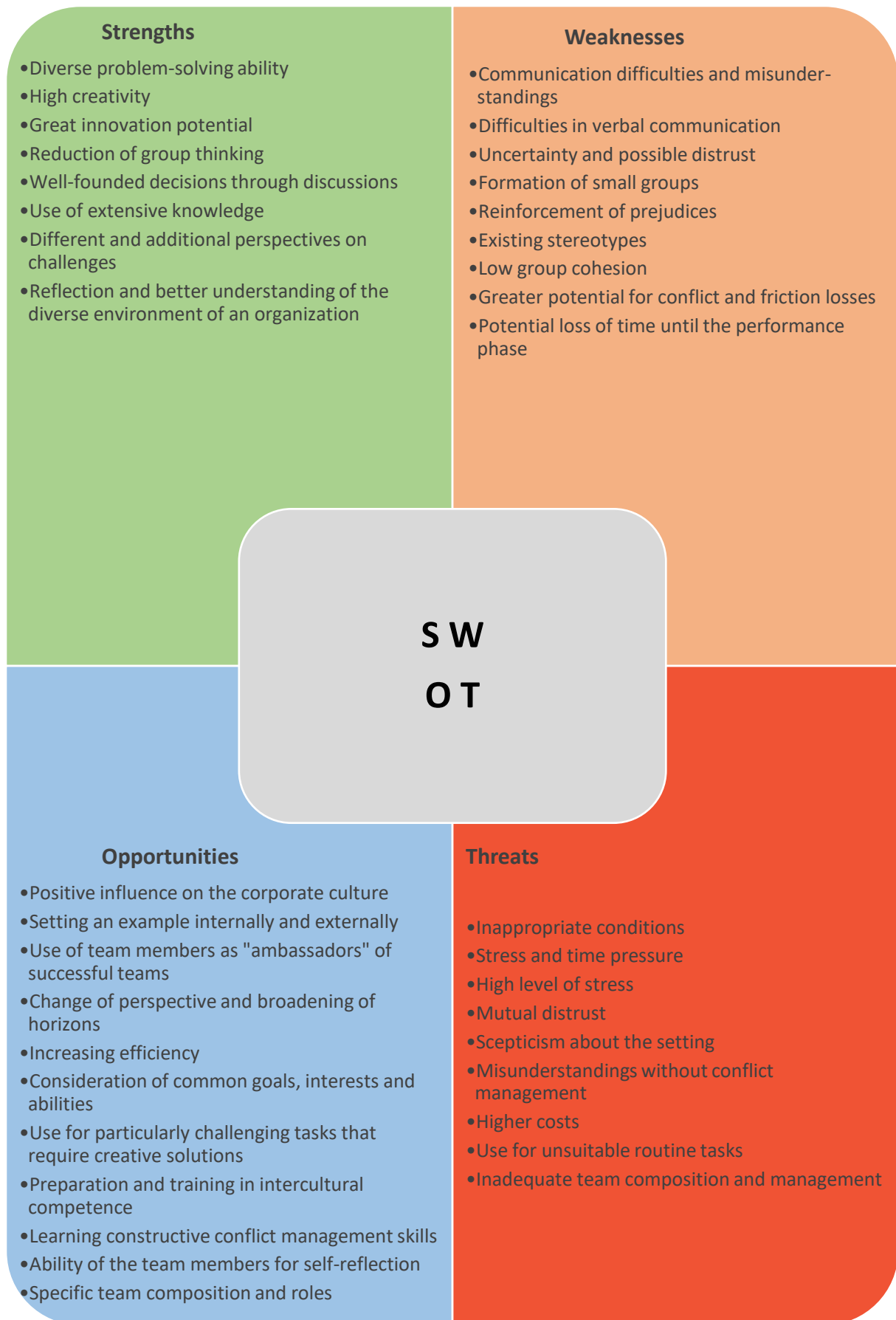
Strengths

- Diverse problem-solving ability
- High creativity
- Great innovation potential
- Reduction of group thinking
- Well-founded decisions through discussions
- Use of extensive knowledge
- Different and additional perspectives on challenges
- Reflection and better understanding of the diverse environment of an organization

Weaknesses

- Communication difficulties and misunder-standings
- Difficulties in verbal communication
- Uncertainty and possible distrust
- Formation of small groups
- Reinforcement of prejudices
- Existing stereotypes
- Low group cohesion
- Greater potential for conflict and friction losses
- Potential loss of time until the performance phase

S W O T

Opportunities

- Positive influence on the corporate culture
- Setting an example internally and externally
- Use of team members as "ambassadors" of successful teams
- Change of perspective and broadening of horizons
- Increasing efficiency
- Consideration of common goals, interests and abilities
- Use for particularly challenging tasks that require creative solutions
- Preparation and training in intercultural competence
- Learning constructive conflict management skills
- Ability of the team members for self-reflection
- Specific team composition and roles

Threats

- Inappropriate conditions
- Stress and time pressure
- High level of stress
- Mutual distrust
- Scepticism about the setting
- Misunderstandings without conflict management
- Higher costs
- Use for unsuitable routine tasks
- Inadequate team composition and management

Figure 2: SWOT Analysis of Multicultural Teams
Source: adapted from Noé-Nordberg, 2019

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