How to Work in Multicultural Environments

Participants need to feel that they are being understood and respected throughout the project. They need to feel that their ideas and concerns are being heard. Those conditions create strong motivation and momentum for change.

It can be a major challenge to work in multicultural environments where your clients' organizations have values, beliefs and certain conventions that are distinctly different from yours. Although multicultural consulting comes with its own unique challenges, it comes with many benefits, as well. There are few other such powerful experiences in which you can learn so much about people and organizations and also about yourself. The range of types of organizations is highly diverse and consultants who can work in multicultural environments often have a wider range of potential consulting projects than the consultant who is fearful or disinterested in those environments.

An organization's culture is driven by the values throughout that organization. Quite often, decisions in organizations are based on the strong values among its members. To help your client make meaningful decisions – and to understand decisions that they may have made already – it is extremely important that you have some understanding of the culture and values of your client's organization.

The following guidelines are intended to focus on the most practical suggestions for working with clients in multicultural environments.

Cultural Diversity Has a Huge Affect on Projects

There are often major differences in cultures – realize that. For example, Western cultures tend to be highly rational and value things that are handy in meeting a current need. They value rugged individualism and competition. Some cultures might value patience, a sense of community and getting along with others, and still others might value direct authority and privacy.

Differences between cultures can lead to increased resistance during a project. You and your client might not understand each other because you have different values. Those differences can hamper the progress of your project, if not stop it altogether.

Some cultures may be overly deferential to the consultant. The nature of good consulting can be quite indirect. A good consultant will help clients to count on each other as much as on the consultant.

Some cultures are deeply guarded about private matters. Thus, techniques of supportive questioning, which might produce strong commitment and deep learning in some cultures, might not be appropriate in other cultures at all.

There are no universal laws to ensure conformity in each culture. Because of complexities in continually learning the cultures of your clients' organizations, it is critical for you to continually 1) be open to differences and 2) ask for help from your client.

Basic Guidelines to Culturally-Specific Consulting

1. **Be aware of your personal biases, style, preferences, lens and focus.**
   This is critically important for successful consulting in any type of culture. You make a

major difference in your client's organization just by exposing the organization to your own nature and style of working.

> See "Understanding Yourself as an Instrument of Change" on page 46 and "Staying Grounded and Centered" on page 95 for guidelines to understand yourself and work in a manner that suits your nature and needs.

2. **Realize that each part of an organization probably has a unique culture.**
   For example, the secretarial staff might interact with each other quite differently than how they interact with executives. In larger organizations, there are often several differences, for example, between senior management and entry-level employees.

3. **Promptly convey to your client that you want to be sensitive to their culture.**
   You should start in your first interaction with your client. State that you recognize that different people might approach the same project differently depending on their own personalities and the culture of the overall organization. Ask your client how you can understand the nature of their organization.

4. **Consider getting a project mentor, or representative, from the organization.**
   Attempt to get someone from your client's organization to help you understand their culture and how to work in a manner compatible with the culture of the organization. This request is not a sign of weakness or lack of expertise, rather it is an authentic request that better serves you and your client.

Become Knowledgeable About Key Cultural Aspects

Consider asking your client to help you understand how each of the following aspects might be unique in the culture of their organization. Key cultural aspects that might affect your consulting project include:

1. **Assertiveness**
   Are members of your client's organization comfortable being honest and direct with each other? If not, how can you still be as authentic as possible and help them to be as authentic as possible, as well?

2. **Body language**
   Are there any specific cues that you can notice to sense how others are experiencing you?

3. **Communication styles and direction**
   Is communication fairly direct and specific or more indirect and general? Does information flow mostly "upward" to executives or is it widely disseminated?

4. **Conflict**
   Is conflict considered to be bad and avoided? Or is conflict accepted as normal and directly addressed when it appears?

5. **Eye contact**
   Are members of the organization comfortable with sustained eye contact during communication or not?

6. **Gestures**
    Are there any specific gestures that can cause members of the organization discomfort or confusion?

7. **Humor**
    Is use of humor in the organization rather widespread? Is there anything about the use of humor about which you should be aware?

8. **Information collection**
    Should you be aware of any potential problems or use any certain precautions when conducting interviews or using assessments?

9. **Physical space**
    For example, are members of your client's organization quite conscious of having a minimum amount of space around them when they work or speak with others?

10. **Power**
    Are members attuned to certain people of power when solving problems and making decisions? Is power based on authority and/or respect?

11. **Silence**
    Are members uncomfortable with silence during communication? Or is it a common aspect of communicating in their workplace?

12. **Time**
    Is time a precious commodity that seems to underlie many activities, or can activities take as long as they need to take to be done effectively?

13. **Wording**
    Are there certain words or phrasings that cause discomfort when people from different cultures interact?

Hints for Talking with Others About Management Activities

It is not uncommon for people of any culture to experience confusion or engage in protracted arguments about activities only to realize later on that they have been in agreement all along – they had been using different definitions for the same terms. Therefore, it is important to ensure that all of you are "speaking the same language" about activities. The following three guidelines are most important when ensuring that you and your client continue to understand each other when talking about management activities.

Recognize Difference Between Terms That Refer to Results
Versus Activities to Produce Those Results

It is common for people from different cultures to become confused because different people are talking about results and others about the activities to produce the results. For example, some people refer to the "plan" to be the document, and others refer to the "plan" to be the activity of developing the plan. It is usually most clear to use the term "plan" to refer to the document itself, and use the term "planning" for the activities that produces the plan.

Here is another example. Inexperienced consultants sometimes assert that, because the client does not have a tangible plan/document on the shelf and does not explicitly reference the document on a

regular basis, the client does not have a plan. That assertion can alienate the consultant from clients who believe that they have been doing planning all along (but probably implicitly) and also have a good plan – they just have not been calling their process "planning" and have not produced a written plan document. Therefore, it is important for you to recognize if your clients have their own form of a certain activity and how that form is carried out in their organization.

Be Able to Separate a Term from the Meaning of That Term

If your conversations with others about management seem to get stuck or mired in confusion, it often helps to separate terms from the intent of those terms. For example:

- Rather than talking about "vision" or "goals," talk about "what" the organization wants to accomplish overall.

- Rather than talking about "strategies," talk about "how" to accomplish "what" you want to accomplish overall.

- Rather than talking about "action plans," talk about "who is going to do what, and by when."

Hints for Talking with Others About Leadership Activities

The topic of leadership has become so prominent and passionate with so many people that it sometimes causes great confusion. Here are a few tips to help you and your client to "stay on the same page" when talking about leadership.

1. **Be clear about whether you are talking about leadership roles or traits.**
    When people talk about leadership, they might be talking about traits of leaders, such as being charismatic, influential and ethical. However, when others talk about leadership, they might be talking about roles of leadership, such as the Board Chair or the Chief Executive Officer. Both discussions are about leadership, but both are about quite different aspects.

2. **Be clear about the domain of leadership about which you are talking.**
    For example, when talking about leading yourself, you might be talking about leadership skills, such as being assertive or having good time and stress management skills. When talking about leading other individuals, you might be talking about skills, such as coaching, delegating or mentoring. When talking about leading groups, you might be talking about skills, such as facilitation or meeting management. When talking about leading organizations, you might be talking about skills, such as strategic planning or business planning. In each of these four cases, the term "leadership" refers to different sets of skills.