
The value of intercultural competence for performance of multicultural teams

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Keywords

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Abstract

Managers working in multinational companies carry out their organizational goals through multicultural teams. Performance of multicultural teams can be examined from an intercultural communication perspective. Executives, managers, management consultants, and educators interested in improving multicultural team performance need to know about intercultural competence and how it affects team performance. This article provides a working definition of high-performance multicultural teams and outlines the challenges multicultural teams face. These definitions along with extensive interview data and detailed self-reports of American and Russian managers working in multicultural teams emphasize the high importance of intercultural competence in improving the performance of these teams. This article also serves to highlight the characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams, the common challenges of multicultural teams, and the sources of these challenges.

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Introduction

Many multinational companies rely on multicultural teams to perform work-related activities. Functioning in the global business environment is increasingly competitive and interdependent (Hofner Saphiere, 1996). The complex problems of the global marketplace require new ways of thinking and greater understanding of local customers. Global customer satisfaction calls for effective functioning of geographically dispersed, culturally mixed work teams (Hofner Saphiere, 1996). Networked organizations, team-based structures, global webs, cells, and virtual teams are becoming common additions to traditional hierarchical organizations (Shokley-Zalaback, 2002).

A majority of multinational corporations use different team structures to meet the challenges of globalization and intraorganizational change (Ranney and Deck, 1995). Marriott formed a multicultural team to complete a global assessment of the current status of Renaissance and New World hotel chains. Royal Dutch Shell's six multicultural teams invented the "light touch" oil-discovery method. Ernst & Young called upon a multicultural team to look at the best accounting practices worldwide (Marquardt and Horvath, 2001). After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism in 1991, US multinational companies saw many opportunities in Russia, a country with a consumer population of approximately 150 million and a wealth of attractive natural resources (Michailova, 2000). But US-based companies cannot expand without enhancing the abilities of their managers to function in multicultural environments. Developing effective multicultural teams is one strategy for improved functioning in global business environment.

Americans and Russians differ significantly in their cultures and the way their managers do business (McDonald and Pak, 1996). Americans and Russians also differ in their economic, political, ideological, religious, and social systems which greatly affect managers' mentalities and common business approaches used (Hofstede, 1991). In this article, we present an analysis of the performance of multicultural teams from an intercultural communication perspective. American and Russian executives and managers express their views regarding the importance of intercultural competence when working on a multicultural team. International managers also report common challenges facing multicultural teams and key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams.

Our goal in this article is not to merely compare these two cultures, but primarily to draw general



conclusions from multifaceted experiences of American and Russian managers, that can in turn be applied across different cultural contexts. Expanding our understanding of the nuances of intercultural communication and the dynamics of multicultural teams has become even more pertinent following the events of 11 September 2001 in the US and the ongoing debate in the United Nations on the issue of terrorist containment worldwide.

Defining high-performance multicultural teams

A team or a real team is:

A small group of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenbach and Smith, 1999).

Team members are people who:

- have complementary technical, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills;
- are committed to a meaningful purpose and specific, understandable performance goals;
- maintain a high degree of mutual accountability; and
- can achieve high levels of performance (Katzenbach and Smith, 1999).

High-performance teams are those that meet all the conditions of real teams and have members who are also deeply committed to each other's personal growth and success. High-performance teams significantly outperform average teams.

High-performance teams have:

- interchangeable and complementary skills;
- a deeper sense of purpose;
- more ambitious performance goals;
- more complete approaches to problem solving; and
- fuller mutual accountability than real teams (Katzenbach and Smith, 1999).

Multicultural teams are defined as task-oriented groups consisting of people of different nationalities and cultures (Marquardt and Horvath, 2001). High-performance multicultural teams are the multicultural teams that meet characteristics of high-performance teams and are composed of people from different nationalities or cultures. Mobilizing the energy and synergy of managers from various cultures to work as a team can lead to multiple perspectives and more creative approaches to problems and challenges (Marquardt and Horvath, 2001). Multicultural teams can provide companies with significant gains in productivity (Townsend *et al.*, 1998).

The effectiveness of intercultural and interpersonal processes in multicultural work teams has become a central issue of contemporary management research (Adler, 1991). Many ineffective multicultural teams drain resources rather than improve efficiency and generate success. Cultural differences among team members can cause many difficulties, including conflict, misunderstanding, and poor performance (Shenkar and Zeira, 1992). Five of the most typical challenges are:

- (1) Managing cultural diversity, differences, and conflicts.
- (2) Handling geographic distances, dispersion, and despair.
- (3) Dealing with coordination and control issues.
- (4) Maintaining communication richness.
- (5) Developing and maintaining teamness (Marquardt and Horvath, 2001).

Intercultural competence

Many, if not all, of the multicultural team challenges can be explained by the diverse cultural backgrounds of team members. The most common causes of the challenges facing multicultural teams are cultural diversity and relational, communication, and cultural orientation differences (Young, 1998). Given the scope of the challenges facing multicultural teams, the question naturally arises: what kind of person makes an effective team member? An effective member of a multicultural team is able to establish an interpersonal relationship with a foreign national via an effective exchange of both verbal and nonverbal levels of behavior – exhibit intercultural competence (Dinges, 1983; McCroskey, 1982; Spitzberg, 1983). Previous research has delineated various characteristics that describe intercultural competence (Kealey and Protheroe, 1996; Moosmüller, 1995; Podsiadlowski and Spiess, 1996), including the ability to establish and maintain relationships and effectively share information with others, as well as personal traits such as inquisitiveness (Black and Gregersen, 2000; Mendenhall, 2001).

Intercultural competence entails not only knowledge of the culture and language, but also affective and behavioral skills such as empathy, human warmth, charisma, and the ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1998; Spiess, 1996, 1998).

Intercultural competence has been traditionally analyzed with the help of conceptual models (Abe and Wiseman, 1983; Chen, 1989; Cui and Awa, 1992). Although many researchers have investigated intercultural competence and intercultural effectiveness (Kealey and Protheroe,

1996; Redmond and Bunyi, 1991; Samovar and Porter, 1991), an adequate understanding of intercultural competence in the context of multicultural teams has not been sufficiently developed (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Wiseman and Shuter, 1994). In this study we use the intercultural competence model (IC model). The IC model is based on the assumption that intercultural competence requires three components: sufficient cultural knowledge, skilled actions, and suitable motivation or personality orientation of a member of a multicultural team (Figure 1):

- *Cultural knowledge*: includes culture-general information about cultural practices, culture-specific information about a particular culture, and information about one's own cultural system. Team members must acknowledge differences in communication and interaction styles of managers from different cultures, demonstrate flexibility in resolving communication misunderstandings, and feel comfortable when communicating with foreign nationals.
- *Skills*: contains the appropriate and effective behaviors perceived as competent in a variety of cultures. This component includes such critical skills as the ability of a team member to understand and clearly communicate team goals, roles, and norms to other team members.
- *Personality orientation*: comprises team members' interest toward intercultural interaction, their emotional and physiological reactions toward foreign nationals, and the degree of empathy toward people from different cultures. Cultural empathy of an individual is related to the capacity to behave as if one understands the world as others do (Koester and Olebe, 1988; Kim, 1986). Personality of team members influences how

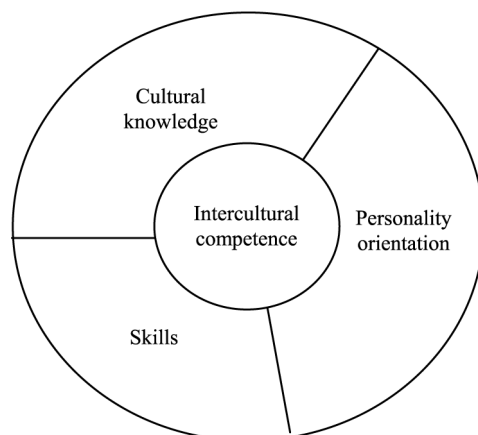
they deal with cultural uncertainty. Are they tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty due to cultural differences? Can they work in a flexible manner with other team members?

Differences between American and Russian cultures

Cultural and communication differences of team members influence team dynamics and an ability of a multicultural team achieve high levels of performance. The American culture is highly individualistic and masculine culture where people are used to low power distance and uncertainty avoidance when interacting with others (Hofstede, 1991). American team members prefer consultation, participation, cooperation, and practicality. They are focused on individual achievement, value assertiveness, emphasize advancement, strive for earnings, open to change and risk taking, and very nonhierarchical. Americans use low-context and task-oriented communication, convey information explicitly and directly, and provide many details (Hall and Hall, 1990; Marquardt and Horvath, 2001).

The Russian culture is highly collectivistic and moderately masculine where people are used to high power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991). Russian team members exhibit more emotional dependence on the team, are more conforming, orderly, traditional, particular, value interpersonal and interdependent relationships, ambitious to achieve harmony, and prefer autocratic or majority rule decision-making. Russians use high-context and relationship-oriented communication and convey information deeply embedded in the context (Hall and Hall, 1990; Marquardt and Horvath, 2001). Therefore, the American and Russian managers differ in their definitions and perceptions of appropriate and desirable communication behavior when achieving high levels of team performance.

Figure 1 Intercultural competence model



Methodology

This study is a part of a larger research project investigating multicultural team performance, the dimensions of intercultural competence, and a relationship between intercultural competence and team performance. Our conclusions about the value of intercultural competence for performance of multicultural teams are based on a study of 40 ($n = 40$) executives and managers of medium and large multinational companies in the US ($n_A = 19$) and the Russian Federation ($n_R = 21$). The American and Russian executives and

managers worked in the consulting (60 percent), manufacturing (28 percent), and insurance (12 percent) industries. All companies that participated in the study employed multicultural work teams and expressed great interest in our research.

We applied a qualitative method to solicit information from international managers on cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). We held semi-structured interviews with each of the American and Russian managers and asked similar questions in their respective native languages. Prior to the interviews, we defined the terms used in this study – such as high-performance multicultural teams and intercultural competence – to the participating American and Russian managers.

Using these qualitative interviews, we obtained in-depth information about the importance of intercultural competence to multicultural teamwork, the characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams, and common challenges of multicultural teams. We used the interview data to conduct a content analysis of managers' responses in order to compare and contrast them across the American and Russian cultures (Rubin *et al.*, 1996; Weber, 1990).

The value of intercultural competence to performance of multicultural teams

Many roadblocks and problems can occur if managers who do not communicate well with team members from different cultures are a part of the multicultural team. Managers must be able to communicate and understand clearly what they are trying to accomplish and what their goal is (Matveev, 2001).

The interviews with American and Russian executives and managers yielded some valuable outcomes. Both Americans and Russians agree on the importance of intercultural competence to managers working on a multicultural team. Both the American and Russian managers identified the skill component of intercultural competence to be of the highest relative importance when working on a multicultural team.

High-performance multicultural teams

This type of management team can accomplish more than simply multiplying number of managers by the number of hours worked. This team can accomplish tasks in less time and under less cost than a team leader can project. When a team leader

plots a Gantt chart specifying the time and costs of an operation, the team will take less time and less money to accomplish the task (Matveev, 2001).

American and Russian managers named key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams. Americans and Russians gave many similar responses regarding the challenges of multicultural teams and the characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams during the interviews, but they differed in their rationale for identifying certain challenges and characteristics of these teams. Managers from both cultures identified characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams as clarity of team goals, complementary skills and experience of team members, clear responsibilities of team roles, high degree of commitment, cooperative team climate, high degree of motivation, cultural sensitivity, and access to technology. A summary of the responses concerning the key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams provided by Americans and Russians during the interviews is shown:

- *Clarity of team goals:* American managers reported clear understanding of team goals and a common course of action. Russian managers named team members unity by clear goals and clear understanding of mission and the problems being solved.
- *Complementary skills:* American managers reported the necessary skills to do the job, strong educational background in the area of expertise of team members, diversity of experiences of team members, and shared leadership. Russian managers named having team members who are professionals in different areas; harmonizing skills of the team members; team that has different personality types, including leaders, followers, shapers; similar educational level of team members, and appropriateness of team role to the skill level of a team member; prior work experience on a multicultural team.
- *Clear responsibility:* American managers reported clear sense of responsibility, knowing who is doing what, and clearly defined roles of team members. Russian managers named clear sense of responsibility among team members, responsibility for own duties, strong leadership, and distribution of roles among team members.
- *Commitment:* American managers reported that every team member giving 110 percent, executing team roles to the best of one's ability, nobody is pulling the weight for someone else, and focusing on achieving a common goal. Russian managers named similar attitude toward work, sticking to rules

- and guidelines, and high levels of responsibility and accountability.
- *Cooperative climate*: American managers reported feeling of openness, welcoming of new and diverse ideas, respect for opinions of other team members, team members who enjoy working with each other, patience, an ability to learn from each other, an ability to reflect and to learn from mistakes, and open communication among all parts of the team. Russian managers named mutual understanding, constant discussion of directions and future actions of the team, attention to the opinions of each team member, and desire to help and support other team members.
 - *Motivation*: American managers reported the feeling of empowerment, team members being encouraged to perform well and rewarded for their performance, and team members who can energize the team. Russian managers named the team being a highly energetic and motivated collection of individuals.
 - *Cultural sensitivity*: American managers reported equal respect for culturally diverse team members and adequate knowledge of the main communication language. Russian managers named an ability to speak the same language and a similar level of intercultural competence.
 - *Access to technology*: American managers reported an ability to use different communication media including e-mail, voice-mail, fax and video conferencing. Russian managers provided no comments on this theme.

While managers from both cultures named similar categories of key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams, their rationales for identifying these categories varied between the two. The American culture is highly individualistic, is low on uncertainty avoidance, and is low on power distance. Americans used direct communication to arrive at the end results, are highly committed for reasons of individual achievement, are motivated to receive credit for personal accomplishments, and seek a cooperative climate to maximize individual goals and minimize conflict. Americans exhibited motivation in order to achieve better results and be rewarded for their individual performance. They emphasized the importance of complementary skills (diverse experiences and skills sets) in order to achieve individual growth, learning, and contribution.

The Russian culture is highly collectivistic, is high on uncertainty avoidance, and high on power distance. For Russians, effective communication is indirect, high commitment to the team is desired

but not for individual accomplishments, motivation is based on security and sense of belonging to the team, and cooperative climate is necessary to achieve team cohesion and harmony. Russian managers desired motivation among team members to achieve consensus on team goals and harmony among team members. They emphasized complementary skills (non-conflicting personalities) in order to achieve consensus building and non-confrontational work environment.

The American and Russian managers had similar views on some of the common challenges of multicultural teams. Managers' responses included: effective and transparent communication; adequate coordination of team members' activities; fine rapport among team members from different cultures; and appropriate management and conflict management styles. Team composition and task complexity explain these similarities in responses about team challenges. Managers from both cultures aimed to establish the best team processes and structures, which allowed them to accomplish tasks and make their teamwork as a high-performance multicultural team.

American managers reported maintaining effective communication, establishing good rapport with team members from other cultures, ensuring transparent communication and coordination among multicultural team members, communicating effectively and appropriately across different time zones, agreeing on team roles, norms, and ground rules as common. Americans valued individual achievement and results more than the personal qualities of their colleagues. Americans were more likely to follow pre-established business guidelines and working principles, but sometimes lacking cultural knowledge.

Russian managers named developing effective multicultural teams, especially during the initial stages of team development, adjusting communication and management style to accommodate to various cultures on the multicultural team, selecting the appropriate conflict management strategy for the multicultural team, assigning duties and coordinating activities among multicultural team members, and valuing an aspiration toward achievement and cooperation differently. Historical and cultural traditions of the US and Russia explain the differences in views about team challenges. Americans have a certain level of transparency, availability of information, and accuracy of information. In the countries of the former Soviet Union, because of their legacy and history, information might not be transparent. Different expectations about transparency increase

the challenge of communicating, coordinating, and information sharing when working on multicultural teams (Matveev *et al.*, 2001).

Perceptions of intercultural competence

The IC model consists of three components defining intercultural competence. The participating managers ranked three components based on their views and ideas about this construct. The ranking procedure included assigning three points to component with the highest ranking, two points to the component with the second-highest ranking, and one point to the component with the third-highest ranking. The total number of points for the American and the Russian managers, summed for each component, is shown in Figure 2.

Both the American and Russian managers identified the skills component to be of the highest relative importance for multicultural teams. The American managers viewed the skills component as the most important and the cultural knowledge component as the second most important when working on multicultural teams. The American managers, who are from a highly individualistic culture, valued individual achievement, team member contribution, and what managers can do – components that require skilled action and sufficient knowledge of the cultures of other managers.

The results suggest that the Russian managers placed the personality orientation component as the second highest in relative importance and identified it almost as important as the skills component. The Russian managers viewed the

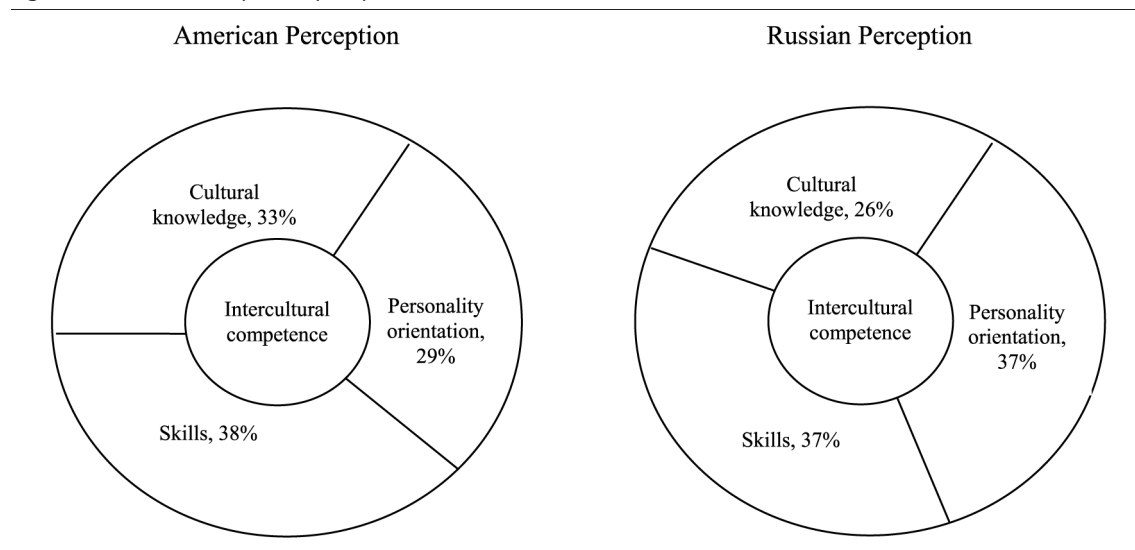
skills component and the personality orientation component of intercultural competence to be of almost equal importance when working on multicultural teams. Russians were less concerned with individual achievement, were more collectivistic, and concerned about retaining group harmony. The Russian managers tended to make decisions based on their feelings and how they personally viewed a situation, and not on the basis of what is the best outcome for the company or the team.

Lessons learned

The key findings from the study of the perceptions of American and Russian managers about the value of intercultural competence, the key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams, and the common challenges of multicultural teams are:

- *Importance of intercultural competence:* the issues and topics of intercultural competence are relevant and important for executives and managers who work on multicultural teams and who aim to achieve high levels of performance. A total of 96 percent of the managers interviewed believe that being interculturally competent is critical when working on a multicultural team. Managers of multinational organizations admit that the success of their organizations depends on how well their employees are able to deal with cultural complexities and to understand, accept, and respond to the cultural differences of managers who are their team members.

Figure 2 Intercultural competence perceptions



- *Key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams:* managers from both cultures named such characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams as clarity of team goals, complementary skills and experience of team members, clear responsibilities of team roles, high degree of commitment, cooperative team climate, high degree of motivation, cultural sensitivity, and access to technology. American and Russian managers differed in their rationale for naming the key characteristics of high-performance multicultural teams. American managers from a highly individualistic culture desired the understanding and clarity of team goals, the skills necessary to do the job, and 110 percent commitment from team members. Americans expected a democratic management style and did not require a system of social support. Russian managers from a collectivistic culture preferred goals that unite team members, complementary skills among team members, and similar levels of commitment by members of a multicultural team. Risk-taking, individual confidence, negotiation with bosses, and an individual desire to achieve were incompatible with Russian cultural values.
- *Common challenges of multicultural teams:* the common challenges include maintaining effective communication and coordination, establishing rapport, ensuring transparency, effective team development, cultural awareness, and selecting an appropriate conflict management strategy. Americans more commonly see problems arise from lack of skills and cultural knowledge, and Russians tend to view a bad personality mix of managers on a team as hindering team performance.
- *Cultural differences between the American and the Russian managers in defining intercultural competence:* American and Russian managers differed in how they ranked the components of intercultural competence – cultural knowledge, skills, and personality orientation. The American managers viewed the skill component as the most important and the cultural knowledge component as the second most important when working on multicultural teams. The Russian managers viewed the skills component and the personality orientation component of cross-cultural communication competence as being equally important when working on multicultural teams.

Recommendations for managers on multicultural teams

A possible application of our findings regarding multicultural teams would be to improve the design of organizational development strategies and training approaches. Managers from different cultures have different definitions of intercultural competence. Furthermore, the components of intercultural competence (cultural knowledge, skills, and personality orientation) are learned phenomena that can be trained. Executives would be able to determine appropriate training contents and training methods for managers from diverse cultural backgrounds. We believe that as the workforce in various countries becomes increasingly culturally diverse, there will be an increasing need to facilitate training that targets such new complexities as intercultural competence.

Our study provides a starting point for thinking about innovative ways to achieve competitive advantage in a global economy. We recognize that this study is time and place-based. It has the limitations inherent in any research offering. From the fast-paced transition of Russia from a communist to a market-oriented society in the last decade of the twentieth century came younger Russian managers who now exhibit more entrepreneurial inclinations, welcome democratic leadership style, value individual achievement, and do not like to discuss family and personal problems at work.

Finally, a drastic change in values and thinking patterns of Americans after the events of 11 September 2001, have forced Americans to rethink their strong and never challenged individualistic cultural values, their foreign language skills, and frequent use of American colloquial expressions. An extreme swing in international thinking after the war in Iraq and continuing effects of globalization on cultural values of peoples around the world impact the perception of intercultural competence of managers in multinational organizations. However, one concept remains constantly important for global executives and managers: the vital necessity to master intercultural competence in order to prosper in a culturally diverse marketplace.

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