# Mine the Potential Of Multicultural Teams

## Mesh cultural differences to enhance productivity.

### By Sangeeta Gupta

In the business world, to "table something" means that it will be discussed later, right? Not always. In some European cultures, to table something means that it will be put on the table and discussed now.

This particular contradiction often leads to a stalemate during team meetings as one group tries to move to the next agenda item while another group tries to discuss the "tabled" item. These types of misunderstandings have become common in multicultural teams. In fact, communication is the No. 1 issue facing multicultural teams.

With the U.S. population becoming increasingly diverse, odds are high that employees are or soon will be working on multicultural teams. Yet many corporate leaders mistakenly assume that efficient operation of multicultural teams based in the U.S. will not be an issue because they are not working globally. Hence, teamwork training typically doesn't cover issues relating to operation of multicultural teams, even as the United States continues to evolve into one of the world's most multicultural societies.

Multicultural teams may have members in other countries or may consist only of Americans with different ethnic, racial and national origins. They can all be U.S. residents or U.S. citizens and still hail from different parts of the world. For example, one defense company has a U.S.-based team of 20 with origins in 14 countries, all doing classified work.

And, in fact, a multicultural team of members from different parts of the United States still faces issues of communication, working styles and leadership similar to those faced by multinational teams. Members from New York may function very differently from members from the Midwest or the South, with marked distinctions in matters such as business etiquette and attire.

Sharon Powell, learning and development manager for Parker Hannifin Corp., a provider of motion and control technologies in Cleveland, says, "We need to think about culture in a different way. It is not just the country you come from but also from what part of the country you
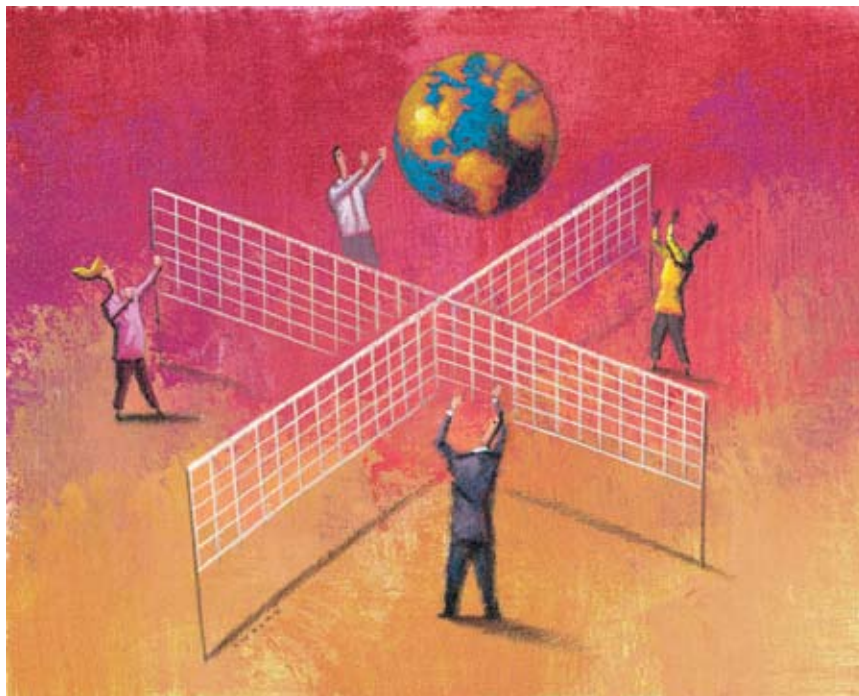
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come from. What is your value system? What is your communication style? What is important to you?"

## 'Better Business Solutions'

Despite the layers of complexity inherent in multicultural teams, such groups offer companies distinct advantages. They provide a "diversity of thought that results in better business solutions," says Delicia Delgardo, SPHR, inclusiveness and flexibility leader at Ernst & Young in Los Angeles.

"The philosophy and uniqueness of other cultures brings richness to problem-solving. The different methodology used in developing software and the openness to those methods and problem-solving leads to a better product," says Linda Rudolph, SPHR, HR director for NDS Americas in Costa Mesa, Calif., part of a worldwide provider of interactive technology and security for digital television services.

Corporate executives across the United States are enthusiastic about this diverse team structure and understand that it benefits their employees and helps them develop products and services.

At Time Warner Cable in Charlotte, N.C., "The diversity of our customers needs to be represented in all aspects of our company if we are to serve them well," making multicultural teamwork essential, according to Pat Crull, vice president and chief learning officer.

The impact of multiculturalism has been experienced across industries. Organizations are responding by training employees and providing them with knowledge about clients. Health care professionals, for instance, know they must understand their multicultural patients to optimize care. University HealthSystem Consortium (UHC) in Oak Brook, Ill., serves as an example. The alliance of 102 academic medical centers provides tools and services for medical professionals at member institutions, including a Cultural Competence in Health Care series of e-learning courses. The consortium developed these modules for nine cultures,

explains Terri Trewartha Kinney, director of the UHC Learning Exchange.

A joint commission that accredits health care organizations has recognized the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity and has established training guidelines. New Jersey now mandates that physicians get cultural-sensitivity training,

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and legislators in Arizona, California, Illinois and New York are considering such mandates.

## Training

How do team members and leaders adapt to this landscape? Forward-thinking HR professionals are using cross-cultural training that focuses on how culture affects the way individuals interact. Such training includes assessments so that individuals can learn about how they interact with others. There are also modules on communication styles, time orientation, business etiquette and creating high-functioning multicultural teams.

Because many Parker Hannifin employees work on teams, corporate trainers have developed programs for senior leaders that define how to:

• Be a team leader in a global culture.
• Work virtually.
• Create awareness of self. Each leader learns his or her personal style and how he or she will be perceived.

## Communication Styles

Communicating effectively is the biggest challenge for multicultural teams because communication styles differ across cultures. For team members to work through these differences, they first have to understand that people communicate differently. Direct communicators prefer to say what is on their mind, and they deal with conflict by addressing it promptly. Most Americans tend to fall into this category.

However, people from some parts of the United States, such as the South, and

those from many countries—for example, Asian and Middle Eastern countries—prefer indirect communication. Individuals with this preference will speak around an issue and carefully choose words to avoid offense. They will rely on nonverbal cues to communicate their messages. They will deal with conflict indirectly, through a third party or by avoiding the issue altogether.

Informal or formal communication styles prove to be another difference that comes out in multicultural teams. Most Americans communicate informally and prefer to speak as equals and avoid titles. They interrupt or speak over each other during meetings.

Formal communicators are perceived to be very polite as they observe the courtesies that informal communicators disregard. They wait their turn to speak. Often, they wait to hear what their manager has to say before expressing an opinion. Thus, they are often perceived as not having much to say in the U.S. environment. This is far from the truth—they are just too polite to interrupt. Formal communicators are often from hierarchical cultures such as Asian and Latin countries and will defer to people with higher titles.

Understanding these styles and how they impact team dynamics and the perceptions of individual members represents the first step to creating effective teams. Team leaders need to be trained to recognize such dynamics and develop an environment that brings out the best performance of all individuals.

## Language

Accents—and the ability to speak English for U.S.-based teams—have become major challenges for multicultural teams, both on-site and virtual. Many HR professionals state that language issues add time to team processes because patience

is required to understand and communicate effectively. Language difficulties can impede conversations, which may have to be planned ahead so messages can be conveyed accurately.

So what can be done? After reviewing communication styles, employees can practice:

- Developing listening skills.
- Being respectful.
- Speaking more slowly.
- Avoiding slang or idioms.

Sports idioms often create confusion. For example, "stepping up to the plate" or "having skin in the game" can mean different things to different people—or can just be confusing. Team members can select words more carefully and use commonly understood terms.

Some companies offer English-language training that focuses on reducing accents. Employees self-select for these programs; such workshops have been well-received and appreciated, and they boast a high degree of success.

## Team Leadership

Leadership styles also vary. In the United States, leaders generally adopt a more egalitarian style with people free to express their opinions and disagree. In other cultures, such as those in Asia and the Middle East, leaders have a more hierarchical style. Team members will generally be more subdued in expressing their opinions and will take their cues regarding decisions from the team leader.

What happens when you bring these two styles together on the same team? Many times, U.S. team members perceive individuals from hierarchical cultures as not contributing to the team. Such individuals may seem excessively deferential and unwilling to take opposing viewpoints. Rudolph has seen that often members of a team from hierarchical cultures "will not challenge the decision-making process. There is no healthy debate." Hierarchical team members defer to authority figures, have a more formal speaking style and often wait their turn before speaking.

In contrast, in U.S. team meetings, people speak over each other and interrupt on a regular basis. Yet people from other cultures see these habits as rude.

Cross-cultural training and a team leader who recognizes this dynamic and takes the time to coach team members can go a long way to resolving this issue and making sure all team members are heard.

## The Right Start

Many companies have kickoff meetings when they launch new teams. These meetings are often in person and provide team members with an opportunity to start off smoothly. At this time, most teams discuss what will make the project successful. They focus on roles, responsibilities and project details. However, the most effective teams also discuss how often they will communicate, communication preferences—for example, e-mail vs. phone—flexibility needs, working styles, and skill development. Such kickoff meetings also can provide opportunities to

share methods that work for other teams, thereby leveraging past experiences.

A face-to-face kickoff meeting puts "a face and a name" to each member, especially for virtual team members, says Pam Burdi, SPHR, vice president of human resources at Trojan Battery Co. in Santa Fe Springs, Calif., whose employees hail from 41 countries. "It makes a big difference in understanding and appreciating them as people and as colleagues," she says. "That's what it is all about ... knowing each other in real ways and learning about each other."

Parker Hannifin's Powell states that the "ramp-up time is faster when the kickoff is face to face or if the team has a face-to-face meeting early on." This upfront work will "decrease false starts that delay the process."

## An Added Bonus

The opportunity to learn about and celebrate cultures creates another business advantage for multicultural teams. By increasing awareness of cultural richness, managers create an atmosphere in which all employees feel valued. At Ricoh Electronics Inc. in Tustin, Calif., teams plan holiday parties with ethnic food, music and dancing. Brenda Whitesides, corporate training manager, says it was an "enlightening experience for me as employees came together in such joy and happiness and shared their heritage. It provided an opportunity to see a different side of them."

At UHC, HR professionals send out short e-mails for a variety of cultural holidays, providing a paragraph on the significance of the holiday and a link to a web site with more information. These efforts have been successful in bringing employees together and increasing mutual understanding, according to Debra Bragg, vice president of human resources and administration.

Many HR professionals leverage the advantages while addressing the challenges of multicultural teams—and find the effort well worth the time. Effective cross-cultural training for employees and managers is helping companies create high-functioning teams that:

• Produce better products and business solutions.
• Understand and serve customers.
• Display respect for other cultures.

Having different cultures within the organization has created an environment of increased tolerance for Restaurants on the Run of Mission Viejo, Calif. "People are the only sustainable competitive advantage in today's global economy," says Chief Executive Officer Michael Caito.

Raj Gupta, general manager at Parker Hannifin, sums it up: "Multicultural teams create a winning culture." **HR**