

Multicultural teams: How to cope with cultural-based challenges while transitioning to a global company

**MULTICULTURAL TEAMS: HOW TO
COPE WITH CULTURAL-BASED
CHALLENGES WHILE TRANSITIONING
TO A GLOBAL COMPANY**



Multicultural teams are no longer hard to find in today's companies. They have evolved from an anecdote into a tendency due to economic and workforce globalization. However, how to manage a multicultural team is still a tough subject.

Harvard's Business Review pointed out 4 problem categories that can create barriers to a multicultural team's success: Direct Versus Indirect Communication, Trouble With Accents and Fluency, Differing Attitudes Towards Hierarchy and Authority and Conflicting Norms for Decision Making.

The H Factor makes some proposals to effectively address all these issues:

1) Direct versus Indirect Communication:

There are two main communication styles in the workplace: direct and indirect. In direct communication (US Americans, Australians, and Germans), both literal truthfulness and efficiency in communication are highly valued and to some extent are a higher priority than personal or political sensitivities. We encourage giving frank discussions.

In indirect communication (Japanese, Chinese, and Indians), directly communicating negative information is seen as impolite and rude, especially in a business setting. To those who use the indirect communication style, diplomacy is the way. In this manner, solving problems is more productive if they handle them with tact and discretion.

Having both styles within a team can create conflicts or miscommunications. For example, a Chinese co-worker might not be able to provide direct feedback to their US co-worker, the latter can get upset and perceive his Chinese colleague as not being frank. This can negatively impact team relationships and decrease business efficiency.

Our solution: Establish a Company Language

To avoid communication issues within the company, it is important to raise awareness about different styles of communication within the multicultural team: both parties – direct & indirect communicators – have to be aware of the other's style and how each one works. Once this is adjusted, managers can make sure each team member knows how to speak the company's selected language. You can do this through team building meetings or workshops on communication styles. The company is born with an inherent language that is usually the most

convenient style for the business to grow. However, it is not always black or white, it can be a mixture of both styles.

2) The trouble with Accents and Fluency:

Non-native speakers of the official company language can feel uncomfortable in the workplace because they have difficulty conveying what they want to say. Some of them may even opt for not putting a voice to their ideas and keep their points to themselves. This automatically reduces the company's point of views and the ability to debate about new ideas.

Our solution: Embrace and Leverage Diversity.

Multicultural teams are composed of people from different social and professional cultures who work together towards a common goal. Make sure your employees focus on the final goal rather than on each other's differences. Remind them that foreign accents are a sign of bravery. Through providing language courses or making the team practice their language, native co-workers will help them to improve their skills. The objective is to convert the issue into a synergy, which will promote language exchange and make the team grow culturally. Organizing company dinners, off sites or activities out of the office, in a non-business setting are all good instances that will help employees feel less pressured, more willing to practice languages, and strengthen team bonds.

3) Differing Attitudes towards Hierarchy and Authority:

Hierarchical company culture is not unique: top-down, flat, adhocracies, clan cultures, market cultures, etc. All organizations choose or create the one that fits best with their corporate culture. Authority can be given by expertise, influenceability, punishment or other critical resources. It is important to establish which ones are valid for each company because otherwise, some professionals could abuse their own resources and act on a position they do not have permission on. In every company, there is a person responsible for specific subjects. It is relevant to respect that ownership in order to avoid duplicities, overlaps and work strategically as a team.

Our solution: Define a Protocol.

It is important to assure each team member understands how the communication works between company members. This way, it doesn't matter where they come from. It is also imperative to clearly define corporate levels and structures, if any, through a protocol. This protocol should be part of your on-boarding program for each new employee. Giving them the tools and communication path will ease the interactions between team members and avoid conflicts.

4) Conflicting Norms for Decision Making:

Not all people use the same norms to make decisions. Norms are understandings that govern the behaviour of members of a society, team, or office. It is important that all members know and understand the acceptable group conducts. Consequently, they are able to act according to the company norms, this also empowers them to make acceptable decisions.

Our solution: Create Processes.

Companies must create procedures for each decision and encourage personal responsibility. Communicate the procedure to your multicultural team, train them and make them learn the company steps. Processes should not be imposed – the “why” is important for their assimilation. Managers should accompany employees in their decisions to guide them.

In short, any member is a valuable asset that brings a new perspective to the company. Although new ideas, cultural aspects, skills and experiences are enriching, it is important to guide and adapt all new perspectives into the company culture framework. Companies who embrace diversity and foster their multicultural team deserve that all members respect and agree to work according to the company ethos. Making everyone feel appreciated will make the difference and ultimately lead to success.



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