

CREATING EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS

One of the more dramatic changes in teams in recent years has been the increasing number of them composed of members from different cultural backgrounds. Various studies of cross-cultural teams present contradictory findings. Some studies indicate that cross-cultural teams can be highly creative and high performing, while others show that such teams have significant conflicts and low performance.¹ When a team is composed of individuals who have different norms, values, language, and experiences, the likelihood of creative problem solving is enhanced, but the chances for misunderstandings, mistrust, and miscommunication also increase.

Because members of a cross-cultural team may lack specific information about each other, they often form stereotypical expectations of each team member based on their prior experience or history with people from that particular country, ethnicity, or culture of origin. For example, because Javier is from Mexico or Jean François is from France, team members will expect them to behave according to the stereotypes they have of people from Mexico or France. Such stereotypes often undermine the team's ability to perform at a high level since they create the mismatched expectations and unwanted conflicts that were discussed in chapter 7.

One senior executive in discussing cross-cultural teams in his organization said: "In my company, we are having great difficulties with such groups. We've had strategic plans suffer and careers derail because of complications arising from multinational groups.

Just last month we killed a global product development project because the team had taken so long that the competition had already sewn up the market.”²

In order to better understand how to create and manage effective cross-cultural teams, we examine in this chapter what culture is and how it influences team performance, along with how team leaders can use the Four Cs of team performance to improve the performance of cross-cultural teams.

What Is Culture?

In any discussion of cross-cultural teams, the team and team leader need to have a basic understanding of culture in order to identify potential cultural problems in working together as a team. Culture is often thought of as being monolithic—for example, American versus Japanese cultures—but there are also ethnic cultures, regional cultures, organizational cultures, and even team and family cultures. And we sometimes find greater cultural differences between groups within nations rather than between nations. Thus, we are not just focusing on teams composed of individuals from different countries, but any team with individuals who come from significantly different cultural backgrounds. Our focus is especially on teams whose members have not been exposed to the cultural backgrounds of the other members of the team. We define *culture* as socially acquired and shared rules of conduct that are manifested in a group’s artifacts, norms, values, and assumptions.³ We’ll discuss each of these four levels of culture in turn.

Cultural Artifacts

Artifacts are the tangible aspects of culture—the behaviors, language, dress, and other overt manifestations of cultural rules. These are the things we can see, hear, or touch and reflect a group’s rules of conduct. For example, when entering a tradi-

tional Japanese home, a visitor will slide open the door, step into the *genkan* (the area where family members and visitors leave their shoes), and then yell into the home, “*Gomen kudasai*” (“Please excuse my interruption”). The alerted homeowner will then go to the *genkan* to greet the guest.

In the United States, if someone were to open a homeowner’s front door, walk in, and start calling out, they might be greeted with a hail of bullets. Entering a Japanese home manifests certain physical artifacts (the door and the *genkan*), a behavioral artifact (opening the door and walking in), and a verbal artifact (calling out, “*Gomen kudasai*”) that reflect a cultural rule in Japan: it’s acceptable to open the door, walk into the *genkan*, and yell a greeting. In the United States and many other countries, this would be deemed unacceptable behavior.

Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are the rules that are reflected in a group’s cultural artifacts and used by individuals to act appropriately in specific situations. For example, in the United States, we commonly greet a new person by shaking his or her hand. In a similar situation in Japan, one would bow when greeting and not shake hands.

These situation-specific rules or norms guide team behaviors such as where team members sit, who calls a team meeting to order, how a disagreement is handled, and so forth. Of course, there can be some variance in what might be considered appropriate behavior in a specific situation. For example, a professor teaching a class may decide to sit in a chair and teach the class, may walk back and forth in front of the class while lecturing, or stand behind a podium—all behaviors that most people would deem acceptable and consistent with norms around appropriate teaching behavior for a professor. But if the professor decided to teach a class while lying down on the floor in the middle of the

classroom, the students would recognize this behavior as inconsistent with the rules that are supposed to govern appropriate behavior for a professor while teaching (and they also might want to find the professor a good therapist).

Similarly, in the United States, students at the college level typically feel comfortable, and may even be encouraged, to question what the professor has said. However, in South Korea and Japan, among some others, it would not be appropriate—and in fact would be viewed as disrespectful—if students openly questioned what the professor said in class. These norms may be unwritten and tacit in nature, or rules could be written down and codified by a group in a formal procedures manual.

Cultural Values

Cultural values are more general rules that represent the collective feelings of a group about what's good, proper, valuable, and right. Unlike norms, values are broader rules that can be found across various situations. These values may be articulated in statements of philosophy or beliefs. For example, the Scout Law of the Boy Scouts states that a boy scout is “trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.” The notion behind this statement of values is that a boy scout will follow and apply these values (rules) in a variety of situations.

Similarly, IDEO, the highly successful innovation design firm, has its values plastered all over the walls: “One conversation at a time,” “Encourage wild ideas,” “Fail soon to succeed sooner.” These values encourage individuals at IDEO to engage in these behaviors, thereby creating a culture of innovation. One organization that we worked with had a phrase that management commonly used: “Do what's right.” The story accompanying this phrase was of a manager who didn't know the right course of action to take, so he asked his boss what to do. The boss listened carefully and then said: “You've thought this through; now do

what you think is right.” The manager wanted more direction, so he went to a number of other higher-level managers for more direction on what to do. In each case, they told him to “do what’s right.” Finally, the manager found himself in the company president’s office asking for direction and got the same answer: “Do what’s right.”

The value expressed in “do what’s right” is that your superiors should not be expected to give you the answers to all your questions. You should study the problem and then take action rather than waiting for your superiors to tell you what to do. This value, which was used in a variety of situations, encouraged innovation and creativity in the organization and was a large part of the company’s success.

Shared Assumptions

Assumptions are the basic beliefs that underlie artifacts, norms, and values. These are the fundamental beliefs about whether people can be trusted, the nature of relationships, the nature of the world around us, and so forth. Hofstede identified four basic assumptions along which country cultures tend to differ: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and task or relationship (long term versus short term) orientation.⁴ Table 12.1 briefly explains these dimensions and identifies some of the potential issues that may arise in multicultural teams.

Since such assumptions are often tacit and not articulated by members of a particular cultural group, they generally must be inferred as we look at a group’s artifacts, norms, and values. For example, when examining the culture of a classroom in the United States, we generally see certain artifacts: students are seated, they raise their hands, the teacher is speaking more often than anyone else, and students tend to focus their attention on the teacher. Certain norms such as raising one’s hand when a student has a question or broader values of respect and order may

Table 12.1 Cultural Variables That Influence Multicultural Teams

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Implications for Multicultural Teams</i>
<p>Individualism versus collectivism <i>Individualism</i>: prefer to act and be recognized as individuals rather than as members of groups (the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany) <i>Collectivism</i>: prefer to act as members of groups (China, Japan, Indonesia, West Africa)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Individualistic team members will voice their opinions more readily, challenging the direction of the team. The opposite is true of collectivists. Collectivists prefer to consult colleagues more than do individualists before making decisions. ❖ Collectivists don't need specific job descriptions or roles but will do what is needed for the team, ideally together with other team members. Individualists will take responsibility for tasks and may need reminding that they're part of the team. ❖ Individual-oriented team members prefer direct, constructive feedback on their performance tied closely to their individual performance. Collectivists might feel embarrassed if singled out for praise or an individual incentive award. ❖ Collectivists prefer face-to-face meetings. Individualists prefer to work alone, not needing face-to-face contact.
<p>Power distance <i>High distance</i>: prefer and accept that power is not distributed equally (France and Russia) <i>Low distance</i>: prefer and accept that power is distributed more equally (Netherlands, the United States)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Team members from cultures that value equality (that is, low power distance) expect to use consultation to make key decisions, and subordinates are more likely to question and challenge leaders or authority figures. ❖ A team leader exercising a more collaborative style might be seen as weak and indecisive by team members from a high-power-distance culture. ❖ Members from high-power-distance cultures will be very uncomfortable communicating directly with people higher in the organization.

Uncertainty avoidance

High-uncertainty-avoidance cultures: prefer more structured tasks and avoid ambiguity (France, Japan, Russia)
Low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures: have a high tolerance for ambiguity and risk taking (the United States, Hong Kong)

- ❖ In a culture in which risk taking is the norm or valued, team members tend to be comfortable taking action or holding meetings without much structure or formality. Members who are more risk averse need a clearer, prepared meeting structure, perhaps with a formal presentation by all members of the team. They're unlikely to take an active part in brainstorming sessions.
- ❖ Members from lower-uncertainty-avoidance cultures do not respond well to micromanagement. They may also be more willing to use new technologies.

Task or relationship orientation

Long-term orientation: China, Japan
Short-term orientation: the United States, Russia

- ❖ Team members from long-term-oriented cultures want to spend extra social time together, building trust, and may have problems interacting smoothly with short-term-oriented members. They also like opportunities to work toward long-term goals.
- ❖ Individuals from long-term-oriented cultures demonstrate greater concern for relationships, whereas those from short-term-oriented cultures demonstrate greater concern for task completion.

Source: Adapted from G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1980).

be a part of the classroom culture. This classroom culture reflects the basic assumptions that the teacher knows more than the student, and the teacher has the power to reward or punish students (by giving grades). These assumptions form the foundation for the artifacts, norms, and values in the class.

Of course, there can be some variance in classroom cultures depending on whether the teacher assumes the students can be trusted to read the material and do the assignments and whether the class assumes that learning can come from others in the class, not just the teacher. For example, if the assumption of a class was that no one knew more than anyone else, then the class would likely rotate who would teach and the class members might set their chairs in a circle (rather than the standard format) so that all could participate equally. Assumptions are the underlying drivers of the more overt artifacts, norms, and values.

Using the Four Cs in Cross-Cultural Teams

This discussion of culture helps to clarify why cross-cultural teams often have difficulty. First, people from different cultures interpret artifacts differently. From one cultural perspective, a certain act, a word, or an object may be entirely appropriate, but from another cultural perspective, it may be highly offensive. Furthermore, team members from different cultures often have norms, values, and assumptions that are different, thus leading to miscommunication and conflict. To remedy these problems, we find that using the Four Cs of team performance can help to ensure the success of a cross-cultural team.

Context

Creating the right context for a cross-cultural team is critical. Significant upfront, face-to-face time needs to be spent to help the team succeed. The agenda for the initial team meeting should be similar to that for temporary teams described in chapter 11.

The team members need to discuss the importance and priority of the team; share their expectations for the team; clarify the goals of the team; and formulate operating guidelines for issues regarding decision making, work assignments, raising concerns, resolving conflicts, and so forth. Also, the discussion in chapter 7 on team diversity suggests some agenda items for an initial meeting for a cross-cultural team.

To help build mutual trust and understanding, some cross-cultural teams have found it valuable to administer an online version of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the widely used personality assessment tool that places people in one of four personality dimensions. (See humanmetrics.com for an online version of the test.) All team members should understand what each member brings to the team. At the team kickoff meeting, the team can review each team member's personality profile and background, and the team leader can encourage members to share some information about their country, culture, or personal background that might be useful knowledge for other team members. It sometimes helps if team members agree to remind each other of their own personality styles when they speak. For example, someone from a culture that values verbal expression might say, "As you know, I tend to think out loud," or, "Please remind me not to take up too much airtime." These kinds of conversations prove to be invaluable for helping team members view each other as individuals. Naturally this is critical to the formation of trust among team members.

Another way to build trust and mutual understanding is through a teamwork activity as part of the team's first meeting. One such activity is the "desert survival" activity, in which the team must work together to figure out how to survive in the desert. Try to make the activity fun, interesting, and interactive rather than competitive.

After the exercise, the team leader should consider asking team members to say something about their country and culture and how it tends to influence their work style. Team members

can use concrete examples from the exercise just completed to help others understand their approach to teamwork and problem solving. At the end of the exercise, each team member could list on a whiteboard some of the questions, puzzles, or conflicts they had with other team members. The team could then explore how to help each team member understand what cultural rules (or other factors) may have caused the discomfort and discuss what be done in the future to avoid such problems.

Another approach to clarify cultural differences would be to have the team engage in an appreciative inquiry team exercise described in chapter 6. As team members describe their most productive team experiences and the role they played on the team, cultural differences can be identified and clarified by team members whose experience in productive teams may be quite different. We often see individuals from Asian countries describe their successful teams as ones where the team leader makes most of the decisions and there are clear roles and assignments. Americans, in contrast, often cite teams where there was a lot of freedom and little structure as being their best team experience. Such differences in expectations need to be reconciled for a cross-cultural team to perform effectively.

Composition

Creating a successful cross-cultural team requires several important things regarding the composition of the team. First, the team leader needs to be sensitive to cultural differences and attuned to the fact that his or her own cultural values may be inconsistent with those of other members of the team. Second, team members should be selected on the basis of their ability to share a common language. Certainly it's possible to use interpreters, but the process can be slow and unwieldy. Case studies have shown that inadequate proficiency in a common language can be a serious problem, and those who are less proficient are often deemed by team members to be less competent and thus less able to con-

tribute to the team.⁵ Thus, clarifying what language will be the primary language for the team—Chinese, French, English, or something else—and making sure each team member is proficient in the language is important. If the team leader and other team members are multilingual, so much the better, for they can help clarify misunderstandings that may occur. Furthermore, finding team members who have lived and worked in other countries or have previously worked on cross-cultural teams is often important for team success.

Competencies

One of the advantages of cross-cultural teams is that team members bring a diverse set of experiences, values, and beliefs that can be helpful to team performance. In some sense, the cross-cultural team gives the team the opportunity to create a unique culture, composed of cultural rules that fit the particular task of the team. Early on in the team's development, the team leader should lead a discussion of each of the competencies listed in chapter 4 and discuss how each team member feels such competencies might be developed in the team.

A discussion of these competencies also creates opportunities to talk about and clarify cultural differences. For example, a discussion in the team regarding how a team meeting should be run would likely raise a number of important issues to be resolved as team members from different cultures who have experienced different meeting styles begin to work together. Moreover, the focus on developing these competencies needs to be done early on in the development of the team. Goodman emphasizes the importance of early, competency-building activities on cross-cultural teams: "Those who work on global teams need to go through a cross-cultural teambuilding program in the formative stages of team development to avoid misunderstandings and to establish team trust. It is critical that team members explore the cultural nuances that often undermine global team effectiveness.

This includes: team members' mutual perceptions; setting global standards of roles, responsibility, and accountability; leadership and management styles; discussion of virtual and face-to-face communication styles; and the development of a communication plan. Other relevant topics to be covered should include the cultural tendencies of all relevant countries and how these impact teamwork."⁶ A wise leader of a cross-cultural team will help the team develop such competencies before launching into significant work by the team and will typically need to spend significant one-on-one time with team members as they may have issues and concerns that they are unwilling to share with the team; moreover, the team leader can help interpret the issues and dynamics of the team to team members individually.

Change

Early in their development, cross-cultural teams need to regularly assess how they are performing and make any needed course corrections. This could be as simple as taking time after each meeting to critique the meeting's effectiveness or having a weekly or biweekly start-stop-continue team-building session to identify problems on the team. Role clarification can also be a useful team-building activity before the team begins its work and, more important, a few weeks after the team has been working together.

How to Manage Violated Expectations in Cross-Cultural Teams

Violated expectations as a result of different cultural rules are often the cause of conflict in cross-cultural teams. In chapter 7 we suggested that such unmet expectations need to be managed effectively for a team to succeed. In the case of cross-cultural teams, there are three primary ways that expectations tend to be violated:

- Communication behaviors
- Decision-making processes
- Conflict resolution behaviors and processes

Communication behaviors are the typical behaviors of team members for communicating and achieving the team goals. The specific potential areas of conflict include how quickly to respond to other team member requests, what communication vehicle to use for different types of information, and how to communicate sensitive information. It is important for the team to establish expectations at the beginning of the project with regard to these issues. Otherwise, it is easy for conflict to arise when communication norms or expectations are violated. It is not unusual for team members to have different expectations with regard to how quickly to respond to a particular request from another team member.

In one cross-cultural team, the leader had a team member who stopped communicating for three weeks. The leader sent repeated e-mails requesting information, to which the member did not reply. Rather than get angry at him, thinking maybe there were extenuating circumstances, the team leader consciously made an effort to keep the lines of communication open. She telephoned him and said, "Please tell me if I have offended you." He said, "Well I'm a Yorkshire man, and we go quiet when we are thinking." The team leader was astounded. She felt like saying, "I don't care if you come from Mars, I need the stuff." However, using proper restraint, she thanked him for explaining and then described her expectations of him with regard to communicating with her. But she also asked him what he expected from her, which opened the door for a mutual sharing of expectations.⁷

This team leader realized that it would have been helpful if she had established expectations clearly at the beginning of team formation that members should expect to respond to each

others' e-mails or requests within a specific time period (within one week is a typical expectation unless the nature of the task requires faster—or allows for slower—responses).

A second area for which it is important to establish expectations is decision-making processes. It is important for all team members to clearly understand how decisions will be made, as well as their role in the process. In some cultures and organizations, the leader of the team usually makes the decision after listening to the issues that team members raise. In more collectivist and egalitarian decision-making cultures, decisions are made by consensus after a series of discussions between team members. The team leader plays an important facilitator role in this process, ensuring that all voices are listened to and that the team comes to an agreement on a decision. It is often helpful at the beginning of the project for the team to discuss and agree on the processes that will be used for decision making. It is especially important to anticipate how final decisions will be made if there is disagreement among the team as to what the decision should be.

A third area for which it is important to establish expectations is conflict resolution behaviors and processes. The basic idea is to establish some ground rules in case of disagreements among team members or with the team leader with regard to how those differences of opinion will be handled and resolved. Some individuals feel perfectly comfortable expressing differences of opinion with other members of the team and engaging in direct disagreements and dialogue with regard to those disagreements. Others feel very uncomfortable openly disagreeing with other members of a team and prefer to use more subtle processes for expressing disagreements. For example, in the United States, individuals tend to prefer to confront a problem directly with another individual, even if it is the team leader. In most Asian cultures, direct confrontation is avoided at all costs. When a subordinate wants to give feedback to a boss, this is typically done only in a roundabout way through the grapevine (other

members of the team), usually when the team is out at night together drinking. This allows conflicts to be resolved in more subtle, informal ways without direct confrontation during team meetings or discussions.

Again it is extremely helpful if the team leader can establish expectations and ground rules at the time the team is formed. A role clarification exercise (as described in chapter 7) may be a useful way for team members to share what they expect from themselves and other team members. The team-building activities on setting priorities and expectations for temporary teams found in chapter 11 also can be a useful starting point. By acknowledging that disagreements will arise among team members, the team leader can legitimize that it is okay to disagree as team members work together to achieve team goals. However, these disagreements need to be managed carefully so as not to result in resentful feelings among team members.

In Summary

Cross-cultural teams will continue to be an increasing part of organizations. Moreover, to avoid the problems that are inherent when team members come from different cultural backgrounds with different cultural rules, it is important to pay attention to the team context, composition, competencies, and change. Time is needed at the start to create the context for discussing and clarifying cultural differences among team members, team members should be able to communicate proficiently in the language of the team, and ideally they should have had some experience in working with individuals from different cultures. The team should work through the list of team competencies to create their own, unique culture as they work together. And the cross-cultural team should engage in regular team-building activities to make sure that it is not going off course and that any cultural misunderstandings are addressed and clarified.

By so doing, members of cross-cultural teams might find out that they are not so different from each other. Remember the differences between Americans and Japanese when entering a home that we described at the start of the chapter? It just so happens that the underlying rule is the same in both cultures: no one can enter another's house without permission. However, in Japan, a guest who is standing inside the door but still in the *genkan* is considered to be outside the house. In the United States, the moment a visitor enters the door, he or she is inside another's home.