

Multicultural Teams: Challenges and Solutions

Introduction

In today's highly-competitive global economy, teams have to meet aggressive deadlines for their projects with numerous complexities not seen historically. It is not uncommon to see teams spanning 15 time zones, with members from 5 different native languages, a wide range of experiences and tenure with the company, and different levels of access to technology to complete a common task. The growth of globalization has caused an increasing migration away from traditional multinational structures towards more global, transnational configurations.¹ For example, rather than the traditional highly centralized, hierarchical decision-making groups centered at a corporate headquarters, more and more work teams are decentralized, meeting virtually across time zones to solve problems, with multiple offices around the world.² This global collaboration is readily apparent across industries, from scientists and managers in pharmaceutical company R&D to international product development teams and global infrastructure projects.³ These new structures bring both challenges and opportunities for organizations.

Today's project teams are often comprised of complex webs of matrix reporting structures that include multiple layers of management, as well as marketing, engineering, and operations staff who bring unique business perspectives and approaches to solving problems. Disparities among these functional business groups' perspectives are further complicated by the multitude of other cultural dimensions that are brought to a team. Indeed, as companies outsource processes overseas, merge with or acquire other entities, or are simply unable to meet the increasing demand for research and engineering staff in domestic markets, the end result is highly diverse, often globally distributed

multicultural teams.⁴ Yet it is not only globally distributed, multinational groups that deserve attention in a discussion of multicultural team management. With the increase in immigration and global mobility of the workforce, significant cultural diversity is also found among domestic work teams.⁵ Consequently, this chapter will focus on multicultural teams (MCTs) whose members can be globally distributed or domestically based, yet who perceive there to be cultural differences on the team emanating from members' nationality of origin. Cultural diversity can be defined in many ways, and significant cultural values differences can exist within the same nationality. Yet nationality of origin is the most common explanatory framework that MCT members use in their perception of cultural differences in their teams. Consequently, when culture is discussed throughout this chapter, the focus will be on nationality.

Substantial research has been conducted on MCTs from many different perspectives.⁶ There is a paucity of literature, however, addressing how MCT members perceive cultural differences relative to other aspects of diversity that may affect a team's performance. Do teams view cultural gaps as negative barriers to effective team function, or do they see positive aspects of cultural difference? What are the cultural differences that seem to affect team performance, and how much impact do they have compared to such variables as language and personality, or demographic attributes such as gender, age, and ethnicity? Specifically, how do the various aspects of diversity in MCTs affect their interaction, productivity/efficiency, and ultimately their output?

It is important to emphasize that this chapter focuses on team members' *perceptions* of cultural and demographic differences, based on their individual frame of reference. These personal interpretations form the basis for such key management imperatives as staffing and resource allocation, as well as the interpersonal dynamics and overall atmosphere of a team. Cultural values differences clearly affect group behavior, but perceptions fuel much of the

decision making and need to be understood and addressed in MCTs for helpful changes to occur.

The purpose of this chapter is to first examine the successes and challenges of MCTs relative to more homogenous groups, and explore the impact of cultural and demographic diversity on MCT performance. The chapter will then present the results of research conducted on the topic, assessing the types of cultural factors that MCT members perceive as challenging, as well as the impact of cultural differences relative to other diversity among team members. Finally, it will explore approaches to optimizing MCT performance based on this research as well as the author's work in the intercultural consulting and training field.

Challenges of Multicultural Teams

MCTs face many obstacles to completing their work, and effective communication and trust among members pose some of the most significant barriers.⁷ A poll of 58 senior executives found that the most important factors for success in global teams were instilling a sense of trust among team members, and ensuring effective communication. Among the top five factors cited in this poll, these two were also rated as the most difficult to accomplish.⁸ What makes intercultural teamwork even more challenging is that any of the cultural differences among team members can affect team interaction and the establishment of this trust. Research has shown that the mere presence of difference among team members is enough to create mistrust.⁹

Naturally, these differences abound in MCTs, and communication is an integral part of the equation. Language variance is often cited as a key problem for multicultural teams.¹⁰ Adding to the purely linguistic challenge in communication is the transmission of meaning beyond mere words. MCT members often need to read body language, tone, and hidden meaning from counterparts who use implied language and contextual clues in communication ("high context" communicators). This communication is often misunderstood in

face-to-face interactions with colocated teams, yet the hidden meaning is even more likely to be lost among globally distributed team members. These latter groups of MCTs commonly rely on virtual communication such as email, phone and collaborative web tools, and often lack the necessary context to interpret their communication exchanges.¹¹

A wide variety of cultural differences also affect team interactions. For example, team members from collectivistic cultures (those who identify with the group as opposed to an emphasis on the individual) can facilitate effective information sharing much more readily than individualistic cultures.¹² Hierarchical cultures might not trust those who do not respect the chain of command. People think and process information differently across cultures which affects joint problem solving. Cultures often relate to time differently, with some focusing on punctuality while others feel the task at hand is more important than arbitrary confines of time. Some people are competitive in the way they interact with team members, while others are more cooperative. These are but a few examples of the many cultural divides that challenge MCTs.¹³ The key for MCTs is to understand which cultural differences have the strongest impact on the team's ability to meet its goals, and to learn how to bridge those gaps effectively.

In addition to the aforementioned cultural factors, a team must also manage other elements of diversity. How one defines these differences, and the aspects of diversity that are found on MCTs, will vary depending on numerous factors. Age, gender and ethnicity representation is dramatically different around the world and across industries.¹⁴ For example, certain industries and business functions have significantly lower numbers of women in their ranks in certain parts of the world. Women make up nearly two-thirds of the customer service positions in Latin America, and well over half of the HR positions, as compared to a quarter of the engineering and finance jobs.¹⁵ These numbers change around the world, as well as within hierarchical levels in a company: 58% of management

jobs in the Philippines are held by women, as compared to 43% in the US, 31% in Norway, and 8% in South Korea.¹⁶

These various diversity dimensions may or may not have unique values, attitudes or behaviors associated with them, depending on many circumstances. There is much discussion about the different communication styles of women and men, or about the different cultures among age groups in the workplace. Yet some researchers show that demographic diversity might not translate into significant differences in cultural values that can impact an organization. On a domestic scale in the United States, for example, one study reveals that Latinos living in Florida do not possess significantly different cultural values as compared to non-Latinos.¹⁷ One must be cautious in assuming behavioral or values differences simply based on demographic diversity.

Overall, many studies indicate that both demographic and cultural diversity can have an impact on a team's performance. The literature is mixed with regards to the comparative advantages of diverse and homogenous work teams. Some studies conclude that diverse teams do not perform as well as homogenous ones due to inferior communication or lack of group cohesion.¹⁸ Conversely, other authors note that heterogeneity can bring about increased creativity and problem solving through the infusion of new ideas and perspectives,¹⁹ especially after a learning curve has been mounted.²⁰ Research also indicates that mildly heterogeneous groups (teams with only a few, well-defined subgroups) tend to form insider/outsider dynamics more readily due to the existence of subsets of team members. These subgroups often leave people feeling excluded, isolated and fragmented, which results in a team underperforming both homogenous and highly heterogeneous ones.²¹

With the potential for diverse teams to match or even exceed the performance of homogenous ones, it is incumbent upon managers to find ways to optimize the diversity in their MCTs. Managers employ a number of approaches to navigate the challenges stemming from cultural diversity. The more dramatic

steps of structural changes, management interventions, or even removing members from a team can carry significant costs, and can often be avoided through appropriate team development.²² Before taking such extreme measures, managers may want to familiarize their MCT with cultural differences and other diversity dynamics among the group that may pose an obstacle to effective performance. The MCT could then learn to work with those dynamics for the benefit of the team.

Research Study

With all the challenges faced by MCTs, which ones do team members perceive as causing the greatest difficulties? To understand the perceptions of MCT members regarding the impact of culture and diversity on their performance, the current study draws upon multiple sources of information. 367 MCT members were surveyed to understand the challenges they face working in diverse, multicultural teams.²³ One survey delivered exclusively to corporate respondents (N=221) focused on specific cultural differences and their effect on performance, while another instrument delivered to both corporate respondents (N=103) and international business graduate students (N=43) looked more broadly at the impact of culture and other differences such as demographic diversity, language and personality. The corporate MCT respondents represented a cross-section of business functions from a wide range of industries and from 30 nationalities. The international business students ranged in experience from seasoned managers with extensive professional tenure to recent university graduates, and represented 21 countries. Both groups were chosen through a convenience sample. The author drew additional observations from corporate clients in facilitated training sessions on cultural competence, as well as from the results of focus groups conducted with the graduate business student population.

Respondents for the culture and diversity study completed an online survey to determine whether they felt differences on their team had a positive or negative affect on their MCT with regards to the team's 1) interaction, 2)

productivity/efficiency, and 3) final output. As can be seen in Figure 1, a large majority of respondents found that culture had both a positive and negative impact on team interaction (56%) and productivity (52%). Nearly a third (30%) felt that cultural differences had a positive effect on the overall output of the team, even though they were not perceived as favorably in the areas of interaction and productivity. This was not a purely linear analysis for many respondents, as they found that certain cultural attributes were helpful to the team in some respects, yet problematic in others. For example, one respondent pointed out how one MCT member on their team was very expressive and emotional in his communication style. The respondent found this cultural attribute was a detriment to the team's productivity and decision-making process, but thought it aided significantly in the final presentation (output) by adding an appeal that was well received by the audience. Respondents provided numerous examples along these lines, supporting the notion that different cultures on a team may make decision-making more cumbersome, but ultimately the interaction of the team enhanced and delivered a better final product.

Of those who cited specific reasons for culture having a positive impact on the team's performance, 26% cited enhanced creativity, new ideas and/or a diverse perspective. The second largest reason was an interesting surprise: 20% found that by virtue of having different cultures on the team, MCT members enjoyed enhanced group dynamics. Respondents cited that colleagues were more thoughtful of each other, going out of their way to respect the various cultures and ensure there was harmony *because of* these differences. Several respondents also noted increased curiosity and interest in learning about other cultures which made

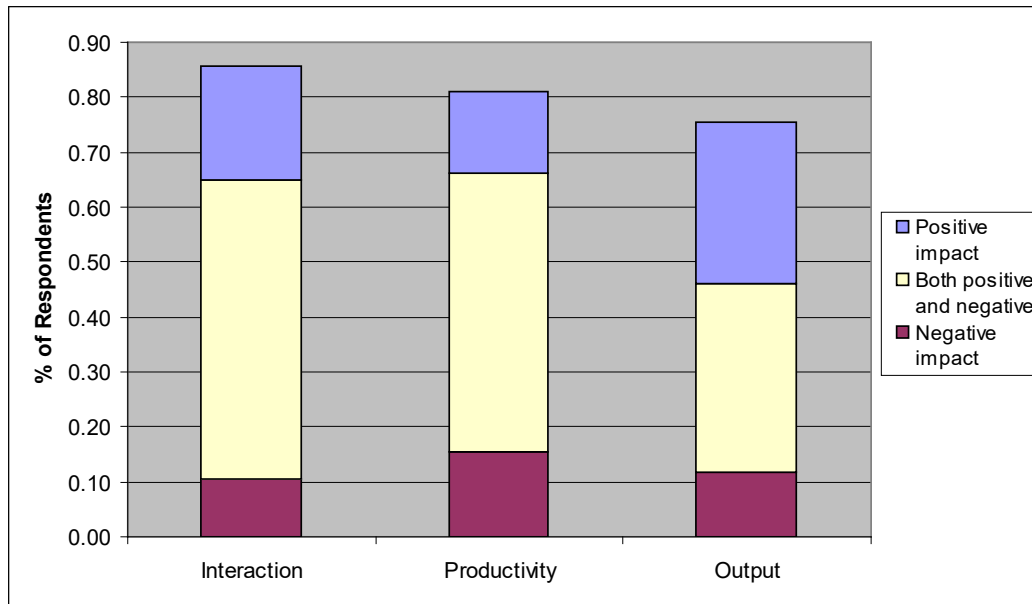


Figure 1, The impact of cultural differences on team performance (N=145)

the project more exciting, adding an enhanced sense of humor, and a balanced approach to decision-making processes.

Respondents cited numerous reasons as to why culture negatively affected MCT performance:

- 45% of respondents cited difficulty with communication as creating an obstacle to effective performance. Of this group:
 - 45% indicated that direct versus indirect communication negatively affected the team
 - 40% cited language differences
 - 15% pointed towards communication issues in general
- 7% found that team members lacked cultural awareness, and made assumptions based on their own cultural perspective
- 5% felt it took too long to make decisions because of cultural differences
- 5% cited varying levels of commitment and ownership, with different senses of urgency

Of particular relevance is the wide range of unique cultural differences that many respondents cited as creating barriers for their specific team. People listed punctuality, or fixed versus fluid perspectives on time, preferences for hierarchical versus egalitarian organizational and decision-making structures, structured order versus flexibility in approaching situations, being motivated by competitive as opposed to cooperative approaches, a focus on relationships versus tasks, and a host of different ways to communicate and interact. In contrast to these findings, a significant body of specialized literature discusses the specific cultural continuum of collectivistic versus individualistic values differences as the key area causing problems for an MCT. Other researchers summarize the “top 3 issues to focus on in an MCT.” These attempts to consolidate cultural differences are clearly limiting in light of the broad spectrum of issues respondents raised here. One must thus be careful about a generalized approach to cultural diversity, and be mindful of the impact that *specific* cultural differences will have on any given team and its unique participants.

When comparing the impact of national cultural norms to other aspects of diversity, the study shows that MCT members perceived national cultural values to have a greater impact on team performance than demographic diversity variables. As can be seen in Figure 2, demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and religion were perceived to have far less impact on MCT performance than national culture. MCT respondents only perceived slight variations among the amount of impact that these demographic variables had in the areas of group interaction, productivity and final output. The one exception was ethnicity, where 17% of respondents’ indicated that ethnic differences in an MCT had a positive impact on group interaction, as compared to 10% who saw a favorable affect on productivity, and 9% on the final output.

Also of interest in Figure 2 is the perception that personality has a greater impact on team performance than all of the other areas of difference surveyed. Though personality is not perceived to affect overall output as much as team

interaction and productivity, its impact on the team is still highly significant. Conflicts on teams are often attributed to differences in personalities which can be seen as fixed and non-negotiable, whereas many of the actual issues that MCTs face can be related to cultural gaps. It has been asserted that MCT members are more tolerant of cultural differences than personality issues.²⁴ This level of understanding can be increased substantially when MCT members assess their cultural gaps and discuss ways to adapt to them. In situations where perceived personality issues are attributable to cultural differences, an effective intercultural management strategy might provide a solution.

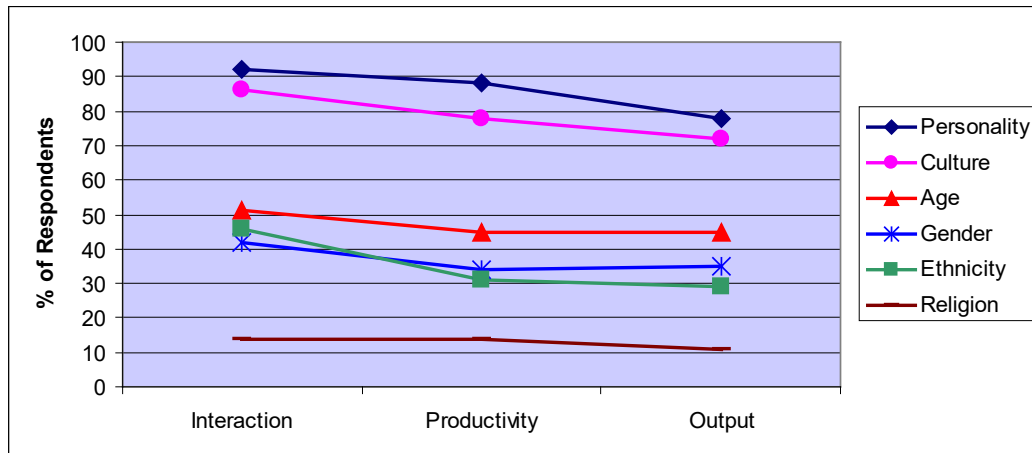


Fig. 2: Percent of respondents who felt these aspects of diversity had an impact on MCT performance (either positive or negative).

Several demographic attributes warrant attention when cross-tabulating them with diversity variables. When assessing the impact of gender on team performance among the corporate respondents, 24% of males felt that gender had a positive impact on the MCT's interpersonal dynamics, as compared to 0% of females. Conversely, 6% of females saw a negative impact of gender on interaction whereas none of the males saw this detriment. Also of interest, 57% of native-English speakers found that language had a negative impact on the team's performance, as compared to 46% of those whose first language was not English.

Finally, one must ask if these MCTs ultimately perceive their performance to be effective. In a previous study of global business teams, the authors found that only 18% of global teams gave a highly successful rating to their performance, and a third of those teams considered their results unsuccessful.²⁵ The results of this current research, however, vary dramatically in that the majority of MCT respondents found their performance to be quite favorable in all three categories assessed. 75% of respondents rated interaction / group dynamics as good, very good or excellent, 78% gave the same ratings for productivity, and in a highly substantial finding, 85% found their final output to be in these top three levels of performance. Interestingly, the corporate respondents had even higher levels of satisfaction than did the international graduate student sample (one might expect higher satisfaction from the students, given their collocation in multicultural project teams).

To summarize the major findings from this study of MCTs:

1. Different cultures may cause difficulties in group interaction and productivity, but members find the differences ultimately provide for a better final product.
2. Members value the different cultures on their team for enhancing creativity and generating greater alignment and enthusiasm.
3. Language abilities and direct/indirect communication were cited as the largest barrier to effective performance; yet members face a wide variety of cultural issues.
4. Personality and cultural differences are perceived to have the greatest impact on the team's performance vis-à-vis other aspects of difference studied.
5. Contrary to findings from an earlier study, these respondents perceived that their team performance was highly effective.

This current study has limitations that future research may want to address. Given the wide distribution of nationalities among respondents (35 nationalities represented), there were no opportunities to assess modal characteristics based on regional data. It would be interesting to see if a multi-

modal distribution of results would be found in a similar study implemented in specific countries and/or regions of the world. Are the aforementioned data universal traits regardless of the national cultural context? Will Latin Americans, for example, who are similar in many cultural dimensions, be less impacted by demographic diversity or would these differences be accentuated? What are the perceptions of managers in specific parts of the world regarding the key cultural and demographic issues affecting their team?

Additionally, although the sample chosen seems representative of MCTs in both a corporate environment and the international graduate student population, these data are based on a convenience sample. Further research based on random probability sampling methods would be helpful to statistically validate these findings.

Finally, this study does not imply that the aforementioned differences account for the sum total of the aspects affecting a team's performance. The ability of an MCT to meet its objectives is influenced by any number of macro-environmental forces such as changes in technology, economics, the industry structure or geo-political events, or from internal issues including policies and interactions with corporate headquarters. Nevertheless, the aspects of difference presented in this chapter are indeed perceived to have a significant impact on MCTs and their ability to meet their goals and will inform the following section on steps these teams can take.

Recommendations

As discussed in the previous literature review, diverse teams have been shown to both outperform and underperform homogenous ones. Results of this study prompt a number of suggestions as to what MCTs can do to optimize performance based on the various differences among members. The following management practices and considerations for optimizing MCTs should be evaluated based on a team's organizational situation, stage of development, and cultural composition.

With a quarter of MCT respondents citing creativity and new ideas as the reason for positive impact of cultural diversity on a team, MCT managers should emphasize these benefits in their teams, and actively pursue such idea generation techniques as brainstorming, small group breakout sessions, and web-based collaborative tools with an emphasis on expanding ideas and approaches. It should be noted that a *variety* of such approaches will increase the likelihood of acceptance by more of the cultures represented on the team. These approaches might seem quite simple and intuitive on the surface. Yet there is a common tendency for people who feel different from others in a group to feel like an “outsider” and, among other possible reactions, either separate from or assimilate with the group’s predominant norms.²⁶ One negative impact this has on a group is the loss of ideas that a unique individual could bring. MCT members and managers should move beyond simply asking for input on a project, and emphasize the power and benefit of the team’s diversity. The more MCTs can link diversity to a broad spectrum of ideas, approaches, and ultimately to meeting the team’s objectives, the more effective the team will be.

Similarly, 20% of respondents stated that the cultural diversity on their team enhanced group dynamics. Even though the multicultural environment may have been more difficult to work in, many people were interested in overcoming that challenge to learn about and experience new cultures. Team leaders and participants alike should consider ways to leverage this curiosity in the group and set time aside for intra-group team building and relationship development. Managers looking to speed up the integration and to capitalize on this common theme might consider inaugurating a new team with activities that emphasize cross-cultural awareness. For example, an MCT can create a team cultural profile through readily available online tools²⁷ and engage a discussion on member similarities and differences. This exploration not only serves the team’s curiosity about other MCT members’ cultures, but also helps them learn how to work together more effectively based on their similarities and differences.

Looking at the perceived negative impact of differences in teams, language differences were cited as the number one challenge people faced in working across cultures. As English is the de facto language of business, many managers feel that non-native English speakers should improve their language skills. Clearly, English courses for non-native English speakers should be emphasized throughout a company that uses English as its primary language of business. Yet there is another perspective that is invariably overlooked, which is the English speaker's role in the communication gap. There are an estimated 309 – 341 million native English speakers,²⁸ compared to an estimated 1.5 billion people who speak English “reasonably well”.²⁹ Given the overwhelming prevalence of *International* or *World English*, and that native-English speakers are actually in the minority, it would behoove companies to consider facilitating communication for the majority, i.e., educating its native speakers to more effectively work with non-native speaking populations.

A company can do several things to embrace International English. The easiest changes for native English speakers would be to slow down their speech, and use audio-visual aids and web conferencing over teleconferencing whenever possible to illustrate communication and add visual cues. Other relatively easy solutions include providing detailed written agendas before a meeting, using open-ended and probing questions to ensure counterparts have understood a point during a meeting, and confirming understanding in writing after a meeting. Additional strategies that may be more difficult to grasp when native-English speakers have not worked extensively with language include using a simplified vocabulary, attempting to limit complex and potentially ambiguous grammatical structures (e.g., phrasal verbs which combine verbs and prepositions that create different meaning such as look up, look into, look around), and limiting the amount of jargon, slang and idiomatic expressions they use. Finally, a systemic approach to variable English competencies might entail the creation of an environment that actually invites English mistakes. For example, one CEO called

his company's official language "poor English" to encourage all employees to express their ideas regardless of the level of their language skills.³⁰

Communication *patterns* also posed problems for both survey respondents and focus group participants. When asked about cultural differences that impeded MCT performance, Japanese members concurred that they often did not feel heard and also found their Western colleagues to be hasty in their responses to questions. They found Westerners domineering, and questioned their diligence since they apparently had not thought through their responses. Conversely, participants from Latin America and Europe complained that the Japanese were not as participative and engaging. Interestingly, much of these misunderstandings relate to simple language patterns. Many Westerners tend to begin speaking either before or immediately after someone else has finished their thought, as compared to some cultures that will pause before speaking. By being conscious of these patterns, MCT members can not only ensure better communication, but can also benefit from building greater trust and respect.

Many survey respondents also found indirect and high-context (implicit) communication styles problematic. Many cultural manifestations of this issue exist in teams, and they can be quite complex. For example, various respondents mentioned difficulty with counterparts from India and Mexico who would not communicate they were behind in a project or would claim that they were able to complete a task without a problem, when indeed there were obstacles that prohibited timely accomplishment of these tasks. It is first important to understand that both of these countries are hierarchical in nature, as opposed to U.S. culture, for example, which is egalitarian. People from hierarchical countries are often reluctant to admit problems for fear of reprisals. In this particular situation, MCT members would want to proactively create an environment of open and honest communication, and foster a culture where uncertainty and questions are not only expected, but reinforced and rewarded. Members may

want to preemptively address differences between hierarchical and egalitarian structures and discuss possible implications.

Team members should focus their attention on the contextual clues that a high-context communicator displays in this situation. MCT members need to become acutely aware of the implicit communication this person is using and what they are trying to convey. In terms of specificity of information, project teams will want to discuss timelines in a detailed fashion based on a formalized project plan that defines deliverables and resource allocation. MCT members should use probing questions like “Could you describe a similar project you worked on in the past? How did that get accomplished? What was involved? How long did it take?” Similar open-ended questions should probe your counterparts’ understanding of instructions and deliverables. A written summary from team members confirming understanding of the project scope, timeline and deliverables will go a long way towards confirming people are on the same page. Finally, more frequent status meetings based on project milestones should be expected in many MCTs. As mentioned above, greater outputs from multiple cultural perspectives should be emphasized by team leads, but members should be aware that this may come at the cost of increased resource involvement.

Various respondents also mentioned conflicts, and how they were resolved across cultural divides. Some MCT members sought direct conflict resolution, whereas others felt uncomfortable discussing conflict at all. These findings are aligned with those writers in the field who propose that talking can actually have negative, unintended consequences in MCTs. The authors assert that as emotions run high, non-native English speakers struggle for the right words, and often do not have equivalent linguistic structures that depict certain emotional issues. It was also emphasized how cross-cultural distinctions can further complicate communication in emotionally charged dialog.³¹ MCT members who commonly discuss and process issues may need to revise their approach and give colleagues

both time to collect their thoughts, as well as alternative formats such as the use of third parties or written dialog for resolution.

Even though these recommendations focus on the top issues identified by research respondents, MCT managers and team members need to be mindful of individual differences that team members may have as well. As seen in this current research, a wide variance of cultural differences affect team performance. MCT members need to enter their interactions with their eyes wide open, studying the cultural norms of a country, for example, but being prepared for all of the differences they might encounter with any individual from that culture.

This type of approach can be introduced and emphasized through targeted cultural competency training. It would be naïve to assume that this chapter could address all of the myriad cultural issues that MCTs face. Yet it is useful to look at the foundation that cross-cultural training can bring to MCTs. Most people are unaware of their behavior, as well as the reasons that their counterparts behave differently. An iceberg is often used as a metaphor for cultural understanding. We observe a behavior that is the tip of the iceberg, yet are unaware of what drives that conduct, and what the values and beliefs are under the surface that inspire such behavior. For example, people from a relationship-focused culture will resist talking about business until they get to know their counterparts better. As a result, a task-focused counterpart might find them to be evasive time wasters, and not addressing the business at hand. This assessment is based on a surface-level observation of their counterparts. If the task-oriented member were to look deeper, s/he would see that the underlying values of the former culture is building trust: how can they do business with someone before they know them adequately? This perspective confounds the latter party who values accomplishments and what gets done over the establishment of relationships.

Companies should closely evaluate the type of cultural training programs they offer to employees. Some training programs postulate that national culture is the most important determinant in an individual's self-identity, and will

consequently have the greatest impact on team function. National-level cultural information is clearly necessary to generalize about a national culture or give a starting point when exploring a country's people. But focusing solely on the national normative culture is limiting and should be viewed with caution. Individuals within national boundaries may have significant differences from the national cultural norms. Intercultural consulting or training engagement that focus on identifying an individual's cultural profile, rather than relying solely on national normative behaviors, are thus much more reflective of the cross-cultural interactions that MCT members will encounter. Individuals react to cultural difference based on their own cultural values, and awareness of these values is crucial for team effectiveness. Managers can assess these cultural differences on a one-to-one basis, or on a team aggregate level to understand how to manage intercultural dynamics as an entire MCT.

Similarly, focusing on individual cultural profiles avoids the generalizations that often occur on a regional basis. It is quite common to hear generalizations about regional cultures, such as the behavior of Latin Americans, Asians, or Europeans. This is in stark contrast to the focus group comments from Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese who discovered very strong differences they encountered with other Asians on their teams. These MCT members noted how additionally problematic these differences were while trying to work with non-Asian MCT members who treated them as one cultural group. Similarly, Latin American respondents as well as workshop participants have voiced the differences and difficulties they encountered working with MCTs comprised exclusively of *other* Latin American colleagues. By focusing on individual cultural profiles, rather than a country or region, MCT members will be much better suited to work with multiple nuances they find on their team.

Ultimately, if managed well, cultural differences can be leveraged to a team's benefit. Unfortunately, differences can also have the effect of dividing a team. As discussed above, MCTs often form subgroups based on similar

characteristics such as national origin, professional background, or gender. Such subgroups can have the unintended consequence of creating an exclusionary dynamic based on insider and outsider groups. One technique based on individual cultural profiles is to align individuals from *different* subgroups along cultural values characteristics. For example, 2 subgroups of German and French nationals might each have some constituents who are direct communicators, and others who are indirect. By putting the French and German direct communicators into a group, and allowing them to acknowledge the strengths and challenges they share despite national differences, one can diminish the sense of “us” and “them” based on initial subgroup formation, and give people an enhanced perspective of unity.

One of the intended outcomes from an effective cross-cultural training is a proactive perspective on not only accepting, but actually seeking out and embracing the existing differences and similarities on a team. Participants are instructed to understand themselves first, before learning about their counterparts’ culture, and how to discuss any cultural gaps they may see, as well as strategies to adapt to them. The friction that respondents discussed in this study can be overcome if MCT members understand the underlying rationale for the behaviors they witness. Typically, once people have been made aware of these differences, and understand why people behave the way they do, they are much more tolerant and accepting of their counterparts, yielding better performance on the team. It is common for MCT members in an intercultural training session to see specific cultural difference among team members, and suddenly understand the reasons for conflict or misunderstanding in the team. Once they learn how to discuss their differences openly and non-judgmentally, and understand how they can modify their behavior to accommodate such differences on their team, performance can be greatly enhanced. Similarly, what may have been perceived as discrepancies in personality often get recognized as cultural differences which can bring about greater tolerance and acceptance.

In terms of operating with diversity in the workplace, organizations have been migrating beyond focusing exclusively on diversity to embracing a more inclusive environment for that diversity to flourish. Historically, “managing” diversity often entailed folding diverse populations into an existing organizational culture. This idea has subsequently evolved into a mandate that organizations consider ways to value and encourage that diversity.³² In fact, many organizations now look at diversity and inclusion not only as moral imperatives, but as vehicles for competitive advantage. Organizations would be well served to explore the cultural differences that exist in their MCTs, and to focus on embracing their diversity so that all members feel included in the ultimate success of the team.

Conclusion

Cultural differences add significant challenges and complexities to multicultural teams, relative to other aspects of diversity. MCT members need to be aware of these differences and should consider the various recommendations presented here to ensure optimal performance. MCTs often underperform other teams due to their inability to effectively embrace and optimize the diversity they have on their team. It is within their power to reverse this undesired outcome through a focus on cultural competency. Given the prevalence of these teams, and the importance of success in their larger organizations, the stakes are high for optimal MCT performance, and diligent application of the aforementioned recommendations should be taken very seriously.

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