

Multicultural Teams

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson you will learn how to articulate challenges and best practices for managing and working with multicultural teams. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Key Practices for Working With Multicultural Teams

As globalization has increased over the last decades, workplaces have felt the impact of working within multicultural teams. The earlier lesson on team diversity outlined some of the highlights and benefits of working on diverse teams, and a multicultural group certainly qualifies as diverse. However, there are some key practices that are recommended to those who are leading multicultural teams so that they can parlay the diversity into an advantage and not be derailed by it.

People may assume that communication is the key factor that can derail multicultural teams, as participants may have different languages and communication styles. In the *Harvard Business Review* article “Managing Multicultural Teams,” the authors point out four key cultural differences that can cause destructive conflicts in a team (Brett et al., 2006). The first difference is *direct versus indirect communication*. Some cultures are very direct and explicit in their communication, while others are more indirect and ask questions rather than pointing out problems. This difference can cause conflict because, at the extreme, the direct style may be considered offensive by some, while the indirect style may be perceived as unproductive and passive-aggressive in team interactions.

The second difference that multicultural teams may face is *trouble with accents and fluency*. When team members don’t speak the same language, there may be one language that dominates the group interaction—and those who don’t speak it may feel left out. The speakers of the primary language may feel that those members don’t contribute as much or are less competent. The next challenge is when there are *differing attitudes toward hierarchy*. Some cultures are very respectful of the hierarchy and will treat team members a certain way based on that hierarchy. Other cultures are more egalitarian and don’t observe hierarchical differences to the same degree. This may lead to clashes if some people feel that they are being disrespected and not treated according to their status. The final difference that may challenge multicultural teams is *conflicting decision-making norms*. Different cultures make decisions differently, and some will apply a great deal of analysis and preparation beforehand. Those cultures that make decisions more quickly (and need just enough information to make a decision) may be frustrated with the slow response and relatively longer thought process.

These cultural differences are good examples of how everyday team activities (decision-making, communication, interaction among team members) may become points of contention for a multicultural team if there isn't adequate understanding of everyone's culture. The authors propose that there are several potential interventions to try if these conflicts arise. One simple intervention is **adaptation**, which is working with or around differences. This is best used when team members are willing to acknowledge the cultural differences and learn how to work with them. The next intervention technique is **structural intervention**, or reorganizing to reduce friction on the team. This technique is best used if there are unproductive subgroups or cliques within the team that need to be moved around. **Managerial intervention** is the technique of making decisions by management and without team involvement. This technique is one that should be used sparingly, as it essentially shows that the team needs guidance and can't move forward without management getting involved. Finally, **exit** is an intervention of last resort, and is the voluntary or involuntary removal of a team member. If the differences and challenges have proven to be so great that an individual on the team can no longer work with the team productively, then it may be necessary to remove the team member in question.



TERMS TO KNOW

Adaptation

Working with or around differences.

Structural Intervention

Reorganizing to reduce friction on the team.

Managerial Intervention

Technique of making decisions by management and without team involvement.

Exit

Technique of last resort—removal of a team member.

2. The Role of Cultural Intelligence in Teams

There are some people who seem to be innately aware of and able to work with cultural differences on teams and in their organizations. These individuals might be said to have **cultural intelligence**. Cultural intelligence is a competency and a skill that enables individuals to function effectively in cross-cultural environments. It develops as people become more aware of the influence of culture and more capable of adapting their behavior to the norms of other cultures. In the IESE Insight article entitled “Cultural Competence: Why It Matters and How You Can Acquire It,” the authors assert that “multicultural leaders may relate better to team members from different cultures and resolve conflicts more easily (Li & Liao, 2015). Their multiple talents can also be put to good use in international negotiations.” Multicultural leaders don't have a lot of “baggage” from any one culture, and so are sometimes perceived as being culturally neutral. They are very good at handling diversity, which gives them a great advantage in their relationships with teammates.



TERM TO KNOW

Cultural Intelligence

A skill that enables individuals to function effectively in cross-cultural environments.

3. Four Best Practices for Honing Cross-Cultural Skills

In order to help employees become better team members in a world that is increasingly multicultural, there are a few best practices for honing cross-cultural skills.

1. *Broaden your mind:* The first is to broaden your mind—expand your own cultural channels (travel, movies, books) and surround yourself with people from other cultures. This helps to raise your own awareness of the cultural differences and norms that you may encounter.
2. *Develop your cross-cultural skills through practice:* Another best practice is to develop your cross-cultural skills through practice and experiential learning. You may have the opportunity to work or travel abroad—but if you don't, then getting to know some of your company's cross-cultural colleagues or foreign visitors will help you to practice your skills. Serving on a cross-cultural project team and taking the time to get to know and bond with your global colleagues is an excellent way to develop skills.
3. *Boost your cultural metacognition:* Once you have a sense of the different cultures and have started to work on developing your cross-cultural skills, another good practice is to “boost your cultural metacognition” and monitor your own behavior in multicultural situations. When you are in a situation in which you are interacting with multicultural individuals, you should test yourself and be aware of how you act and feel. Observe both your positive and negative interactions with people, and learn from them.
4. *Developing cognitive complexity:* Developing **cognitive complexity** is the final best practice for boosting multicultural skills. This is the most advanced, and it requires being able to view situations from more than one cultural framework. In order to see things from another perspective, you need to have a strong sense of emotional intelligence, empathy, and sympathy, and be willing to engage in honest communications.



TERM TO KNOW

Cognitive Complexity

The ability to view situations from more than one cultural framework.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how to articulate challenges and best practices for managing and working with multicultural teams. You learned about some **key practices for working with multicultural teams** that allow team leaders to parlay diversity into an advantage. You learned about the four key cultural differences that can cause destructive conflicts in a team—direct versus indirect communication, trouble with accents and fluency, differing attitudes toward hierarchy, and conflicting decision-making norms—as well as several interventions to try if these conflicts arise, such as adaptation, structural intervention, managerial intervention, and exit (used as a last resort). You also learned about the importance of **the role of cultural intelligence in teams**, referring to team members developing a competency and a skill that enables them to function effectively in cross-cultural environments. Lastly, you learned the **four best practices for honing cross-cultural skills** to help you become a better team member in an increasingly multicultural world: 1) broaden your mind; 2) develop your cross-cultural skills through practice and experiential learning; 3) boost your cultural metacognition; and 4) develop cognitive complexity.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Access for free at <https://openstax.org/books/principles-management/pages/1-introduction>

REFERENCES

- Brett, J., Behfar, K., & Kern, M. C. (2006, November). Managing Multi-cultural Teams. *Harvard Business Review*. hbr.org/2006/11/managing-multicultural-teams
- Li, Y., & Liao, Y. (2015). *Cultural competence: Why it matters and how you can acquire it* IESE Insight. www.ieseinsight.com/doc.aspx?id=1733&ar=20



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