Brett, Behfar, and Kern (2006), authors of the seminal Harvard Business Review article "Managing Multicultural Teams," identified four significant cultural variances that might lead to contentious disputes within a team. Direct communication versus indirect communication is the first distinction. While some cultures are more indirect than others and ask questions rather than pointing out issues, individuals in direct communication cultures are more straightforward and plain in their communication. This discrepancy can lead to conflict because, at its most extreme, some people may find direct communication offensive. In contrast, others may find indirect communication unproductive and passive-aggressive in team settings.

Problems with accents and fluency are the second difference that multicultural teams could encounter. When team members speak different languages, one may predominate in group interactions, leaving those who don't speak it feeling excluded. The primary language speakers may think those individuals contribute less or are less skilled. The next difficulty arises when different perspectives on hierarchy exist. Some cultures treat team members according to the hierarchy and are very respectful. Other cultures are more egalitarian and don't show as much evidence of hierarchy. Conflicts could result if certain people feel disrespected and mistreated because of their status. Conflicting decision-making norms are the absolute difference that could provide a problem for multicultural teams. Different cultures approach decision-making differently; some will do extensive prior planning and study. The slow response and somewhat longer cognitive process may disappoint those cultures that make decisions more quickly (requiring a minimal amount of information to do so).

The following are some of the potential interventions that can mitigate cultural challenges.

- **Adaptation:** Team members learned about cultural differences and learned to work with them.
- **Structural Intervention:** Reorganize team members to reduce friction and increase productivity.
- **Managerial Intervention:** Managers make decisions and direct the team. It minimizes team interactions, so it should be used sparingly.
- **Exit Intervention:** This should be the last resource because it involves removing voluntary or involuntary a team member.

The following table is the representative problem examples that intercultural teams may present. It identifies the conditions that can enable the situation and the strategy that should be used in each case. The table displays some of the potential complications in each situation. As you read through the table, think if you have ever encountered any of these problems and what, if any, strategy was used to resolve the issue.

Representative Problems	Enabling Situational Conditions	Strategy	Complicating Factors
- Conflict arises from decision-making differences - Misunderstanding or stonewalling arises from communication differences	- Team members can attribute a challenge to culture rather than personality Higher-level managers are not available or the team would be embarrassed to involve them	Adaptation	- Team members must be exceptionally aware - Negotiating a common understanding takes time
- The team is affected by emotional tensions relating to fluency issues or prejudice - Team	- The team can be subdivided to mix cultures or expertise - Tasks can be subdivided	Structural Intervention	- If team members aren't carefully distributed, subgroups can strengthen preexisting differences - Subgroup solutions have to fit back together
- Violations of the hierarchy have resulted in loss of face - An absence of ground rules is causing conflict	- The problem has produced a high level of emotion - The team has reached a stalemate - A higher-level manager is able and willing to intervene	- Managerial Intervention	- The team becomes overly dependent on the manager - Team members may be sidelined or resistant
A team member cannot adjust to the challenge at hand and has become unable to contribute to the project	- The team is permanent rather than temporary - Emotions are beyond the point of intervention - Too much face has been lost	- Exit	- Talent and training costs are lost

Adapted from Brett, Jeanne & Behfar, Kristin & Kern, Mary. (2006). Managing Multicultural Teams. Harvard business review. 89.

📖 Reading Resource

To learn more about managing and working with multicultural teams, read the following article.

- **Managing Multicultural Teams.** (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6666162_Managing_Multicultural_Teams)

▶ Video Resource

To conclude this section, let's review how to improve cross-cultural communication at work. Cross-cultural communication is understanding differences and similarities among cultural groups to participate within a group or team effectively. The following video explains the benefits of cross-cultural communication. It describes how we can improve our cross-cultural communication at work by accepting agility, being flexible, encouraging meaningful conversations, and developing cultural awareness. Click the following link to watch the complete video.

How to Improve Cross Cultural Communication at Work