

Multicultural Management

Meaning

Ongoing globalization, increasing scale of migration, demographic changes, emerging markets and technology evolution lead to continuous change of the labor environment of contemporary organizations. The necessity of managing diversity and multiculturalism goes far beyond human resource management. Organizations can benefit from it with an increased level of innovation, improved employee engagement, better customer relationships and satisfaction increases in operating profit and market share, and by achieving competitive advantage in the market.

The concept of multicultural and diversity management encompasses acceptance and respect, recognition and valuing of individual differences. Diversity is defined as differences between people, which can include dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. Multiculturalism refers to the existence of linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse segments in an organization.

Must-have multicultural management skills

Today's workplace is much more diverse than twenty years ago. People from all kinds of background, including nationalities, ethnicities, and religions, can be found working together in an office. Besides, differences in education levels, self-perceptions (positive or negative), and social classes also contribute to the complexity of a modern workplace.

Thus, more than ever before, a leader should have the so-called "multicultural management skills."

First things first, let's recognize the important workplace issues that are likely to create misunderstandings among team members and what a manager can do to mitigate them. Six of the most pressing issues are time management, respect for authority, teamwork and responsibility, interpretations of transparency and ethics, communication styles, and acceptance and reluctance in giving and receiving feedback.

1. Time management.

In some cultures, being prompt is a rarity and being late is the “normal.” Ensuring that every team member is on the same page regarding timeframes and deadlines would require an extra effort. Start with developing a strong understanding of the company culture’s prompt and deadline-oriented culture. Make it a habit among team members with lesser-important deadlines. Over time, team members would be more accustomed to being prompt and on time.

2. Respect for authority.

Every culture teaches people to be respectful to the authority. However, the degree of respect and how people respond to authority differs from culture to culture. Also, the higher the education level, the more likely the individual to scrutinize the quality of the authority. Thus, a manager should be aware of these differences and expect to receive different responses. For this, you would need to be ready to respond accordingly.

3. Teamwork and responsibility.

Teamwork has a lot to do with being responsible. A good team comprises of team members who are responsible for their tasks and each other. They are also aware of whom the accountable person is and ensuring the tasks are completed satisfactorily. Different backgrounds affect how a team operates since the levels of esteem and skills differ from person to person. Thus, it is a manager’s role to ensure that every team member works according to their skills and encourage them to work confidently despite their differences.

4. Interpretations of transparency and ethics.

How transparent should it be? How ethical? Every individual perceives transparency and ethics differently. However, when standards are used, cultivate the understanding that transparency and ethical activities must be adhered to at all times. Keep the team members on the same page by reiterating the importance of maintaining transparency and being ethical in performance.

5. Communication styles.

Some cultures and personality types are quieter and perceived as “introverted,” while others are more talkative and “extroverted.” These differences are both valuable as they can cater to different needs in a team. Some positions require more inner thinking, while others need more talking. Place the right people with the right communication style in the right position. However, when working in a team, a manager should be aware of those quiet ones and give them equal opportunity to speak up in meetings.

6. Acceptance and reluctance in giving and receiving feedback.

Some individuals are not used to giving and receiving feedback. They tend to stay within the confine of their comfort zone. It is the manager’s job to ensure that every team member accepts the necessary feedback and follow through with it. Start by opening yourself to receiving feedback from such individuals; ask them what they need you to know about. This way, mutual understanding can grow.

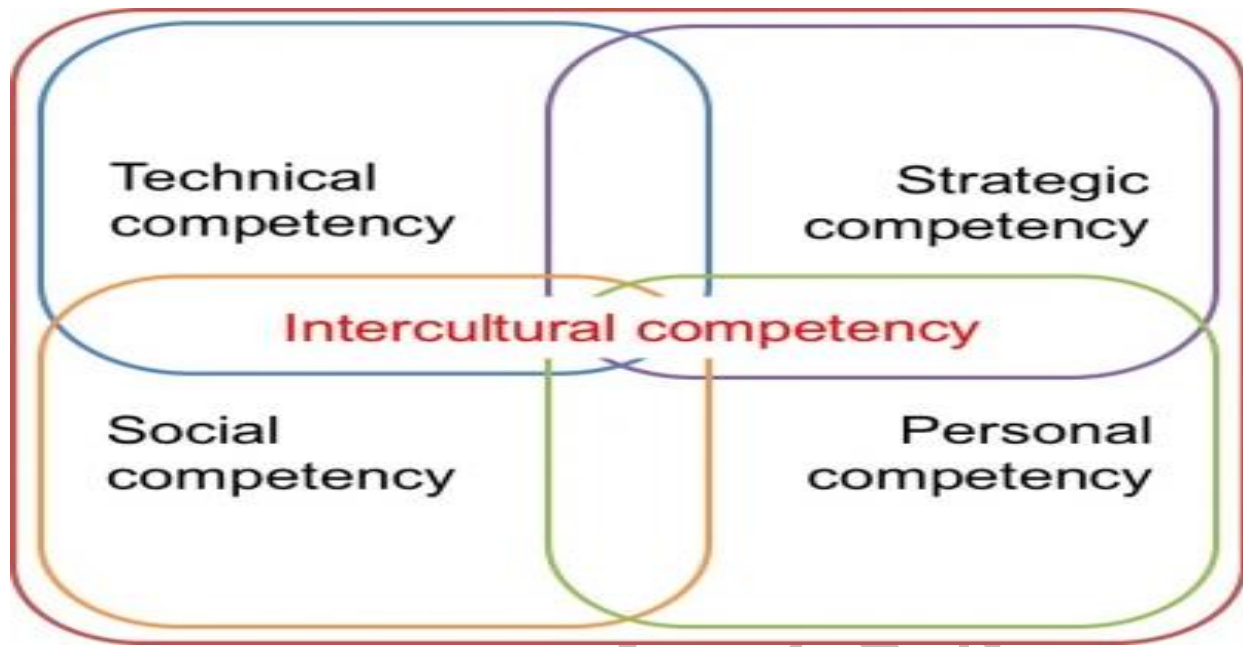
In conclusion, managers in modern multicultural workplaces should be aware of the various background and habitual differences. It can be quite challenging to maneuver, but once you have mastered the skills of managing a multicultural workplace, the rewards can be tremendous.

Steps to Multicultural Team Success

1. Select a cross-culturally competent team leader. Leading a multicultural team successfully requires competencies that go well beyond the technical knowledge and the leadership qualities usually required. To be effective, leaders of multicultural teams need:

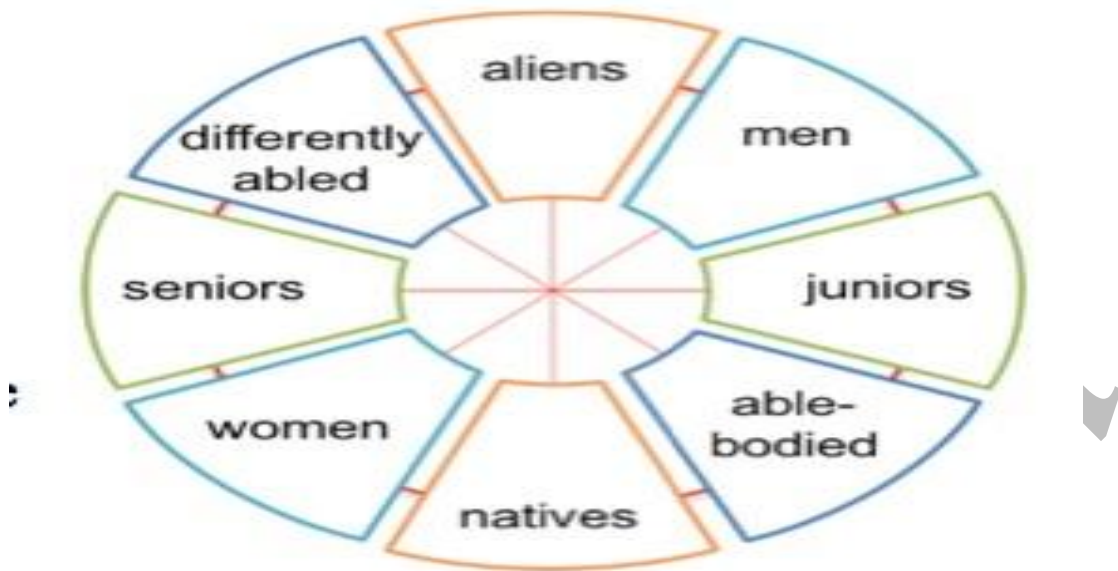
- A high level of cultural flexibility
- Robust ambiguity tolerance
- Low levels of ethnocentrism

These intercultural competencies are best learned through cross-cultural training combined with personal work experience (e.g., being a member of a diverse team, working in an unfamiliar environment, having a mentor with a different cultural background).



2. Select the team members. Next, a team leader who already has the necessary cross-cultural proficiency selects the members based on specific criteria related to the team's/project's target population (adapted from Jent, N., "Diversity: Zauberwort zur Leistungssteigerung des HR-Bereichs," 2005). These selection criteria need to be clearly defined and transparently communicated to all team members.

Reminder: The organizational framework, the hierarchy within the broader organization, and the actual physical/virtual space have to be already defined.



3. Make the kick-off phase personal. Start any project or team kick-off phase with a team event that gives members an opportunity to get to know each other personally, such as a shared meal. And if for some reason the team can't meet in person, at the very least a friendly videoconference allowing for small talk is recommended.

4. Take the time to build relationships and trust. Personal relationships and trust are a central element of doing business in many cultures around the globe. Other cultures (e.g., the Germans) prefer to approach negotiations and projects head-on without much time given to relationship building. However, unless you are German and manage a team of Germans (especially men), investing time to build trusting relationships is never wrong. By the way, even German men like to socialize and build relationships after work.

5. Learn about differences. While team members might have similar educations, professional experience, and work in the same industry, there are still considerable differences to be found between team members. It is those differences (e.g., career path, education, culture, hobbies, social background) that will lead to creative and innovative ideas, and eventually will influence the quality of team performance.

For example, a large American telecom company increased sales and retention of customers calling to Brazil by listening to its South American team member. She explained that Brazilians

like to take their time talking to friends and family back home. As a result, the company lowered the call rate, but still increased its profit because of the longer call times.

6. Clarify expectations:

- **Leaders:** The process of discussing and clarifying expectations is a necessary step for any team, but is particularly crucial for multicultural teams. Diverse employees will have different expectations about leadership due to factors such as age and professional or cultural background. Consider the varying patterns of expectations and common processes that need to be negotiated. Who expects what, and why? How will decisions be reached? Who decides ultimately? Who can voice criticism?
- **Team members:** The members need to be able to voice and discuss their expectations before some kind of common ground can be negotiated. Clarify potential conflicts and explore possible remedies. How different are the issues raised, and the troubleshooting plans imagined by the various team members? If team goals cannot be met in a timely manner, can a plan B be envisioned and implemented?

7. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Choosing adequate communication channels and cooperating consistently are essential for local and virtual teams. Which tools fit the team's framework and work methods? As we all know, communicating clearly and without conflict is challenging even in our mother tongue. The difficulties multiply exponentially when different vocabularies are at play such as in the case of interdisciplinary and/or international teams. Therefore, it becomes even more important to apply the golden rules of communication:

- Communicate with a positive attitude
- Be clear about who you are addressing
- Be descriptive
- Avoid making value judgments
- Rephrase what you heard

- Give examples
- Speak only for yourself
- Suggest changes that can be linked to behaviors

By working hard to create a team culture, communication and collaboration just might become a pleasure and an inspiration instead of hard work.

8. Set and respect deadlines. It is a well-known fact that time does not mean the same to everybody; after all, who does not get annoyed by chronic latecomers? Time can be a sensitive issue personally and culturally. To get everybody on the same page, communicate the rules about time keeping and deadlines clearly. This is especially important if some of the team members are not working in the same time zone and the common work hours are limited. In this scenario, team members have to be even more flexible, as returning a phone call might have to wait for the next day. What time frames are acceptable, and when is a call-back considered late? What are the consequences if deadlines are not respected?

9. Be alert to signs of trouble. Inconsistencies and delays might signal issues with team collaboration. Don't procrastinate when you become aware of deadlines not being met or people avoiding direct contact. Helpful interventions to prevent trouble may include personal talks, social gatherings, reminders of milestones achieved, or teambuilding events. When considering any intervention, cultural intelligence and sensitivity are of utmost importance to achieve the goal of better collaboration.

10. Assess the team's work. Of course, feedback about the team's progress needs to be given. But a majority of cultures consider public critique offensive and improper, and only allow for indirect or private face-to-face critique. To work together successfully, it, thus, is necessary to tailor any critique to the member's cultural background. While it might be acceptable to give critique directly and rather bluntly when working with a Dutch team member, for example, this will not be acceptable to individuals from other cultures such as China or India. It might be helpful to call upon a (cultural) facilitator/mediator if the issue involves more than one team member, as that is usually a signal of a bigger issue. Again, don't procrastinate.