

Multicultural Management: It's Challenging

JULY 20, 2023 | ARTICLES



It's a global world. Tech enables conversations with people on multiple continents in multiple time zones. Video conferencing links people across the globe 24/7. AI-powered language tools such as Google Translate change one language to another with a click. You can watch a presentation in another country on your smart phone through airpods that travel with you. And social media connects us with people in our networks and then exponentially, in our networks' networks.

Multicultural Teams are the Norm

However, the fact that people can very easily **connect** does not necessarily mean they **understand one another**. This is a critical issue for companies as more and more organizations are relying on multicultural teams. From Fortune 500 corporations to family run businesses, multicultural work teams have become the norm. Close collaboration among individuals of different nationalities, values, and behaviours is standard operating procedure.

Studies have shown that multicultural teams, thanks to their cultural diversity, often approach business problems from a range of perspectives (technical, commercial, human) ultimately developing better solutions to complex problems. However, multicultural teams face particular obstacles. To overcome these challenges, companies must plan, train, and provide specific initiatives for support.

According to Thierry Baux, Managing Partner of IMSA Search Global Partners France and CEO of B-Ressource, "Most of our clients are utilizing multicultural teams. Whether they are setting up a subsidiary in Brazil, buying a company in Korea, recruiting in Mexico, selling in China, or managing a plant in India, they require cross-cultural collaboration. Yet, each situation brings with it unique human resource issues."

Across Cultures, Differences Arise

Different cultures may appreciate different work styles with different measures of success. So while Latin culture encourages people to express their emotions, even in the workplace, Japanese culture focuses on harmony without confrontation. In France, trust is heavily dependent on personal relationships, while in Germany and Japan trust is built on evidence and facts. And while a French executive may aspire to maximize originality, a German team leader may strive for the greatest utility. Global business leaders and entrepreneurs are often faced with teams that span the world. Among their most prevalent challenges is intercultural management.

Understanding "Local"

Misinterpretation of behaviours, signs, and cues can lead to intercultural tensions. When abroad, we all have a propensity to use our own value system as a reference point, or to unconsciously impose it on others. When travelling, heightened awareness of the local value systems, including normative business practices will help minimize conflicts.

But, once you understand the local culture, don't assume that all local people fit the same profile. Another common mistake is generalizing, defining all employees in a certain country by a simplified profile. As employees are increasingly transient, moving, studying, working, partnering, and living abroad, they internalize many different combinations of cultural traits.

To overcome inherent bias, consult a trusted local representative. Engage them to teach about national, regional, and local culture, as well as the company culture, team culture, and individual executive style. Multicultural team training is a necessity.

Invite Inclusiveness

As anthropologist Edward Twitchell Hall noted, "All business is between people – anything that complicates or hinders relationships between people, compromises the business." A culture of inclusiveness and respect for others makes employees feel valued. To create a positive work culture, the C-Suite and multicultural team leaders need self-awareness to ensure they are sensitive and trained in how to welcome diversity. One very tangible issue that impacts whether people feel respected is time zone. Consider rotating meeting times so everyone's needs are more equally addressed.

Respect for Languages

English has become the universal language of exchange. However, in intercultural situations, the team leader must be aware that speaking English, rather than one's native tongue may inhibit expressions of feelings. The leader should make room for techniques that encourage people to express themselves, whether in English or the local language.

Be Humble, Be Curious, Be Patient

Finally, adds Thierry Baux, "Clients ask us, 'What qualities are essential for multicultural team leadership success?' We respond, 'Be Humble, Be Curious, Be Patient.' Humility means focusing on listening rather than talking. Curiosity means asking questions to promote understanding and accepting differences. Patience means improving your tolerance for frustration when things are not expressed or implemented your way."

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