LEADERSHIP & TEAM MANAGEMENT

International Teams: Beyond Cultural Differences

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> *Multicultural teams are different. In addition to culture the team needs to consider: the purpose for its existence, the influence of personality differences, the impact of cultural and professional identities, the importance of emotional intelligence, and the vital role of adequate support systems. Team leaders need updated global competencies which they may not have learned in business school.*

An immediate result of globalization is that many of us are faced with the challenge of participating in, managing or coaching a multicultural team. Not too long ago, I was asked to help "develop" ("fix" would have been a better word) an international team based in Shanghai, China. The team members for the most part shared a background in engineering so it was easy to assume that the most "serious" differences would come from their diverse cultural backgrounds. In this case they came from the USA, Italy, the UK, and China. The future of their multinational firm in the China market depended in large part on the ability of this senior team to work together as a cohesive group - within an accelerated time frame. Have you ever found that the cross-cultural models you have learned are not always enough to solve the problem or improve the performance of a struggling international team?

Multicultural Teams are Complex

Cross-cultural knowledge is an obvious pre-requisite for working with any team whose members come from different cultures. We acquire this knowledge from our reading, from our studies, from company-sponsored seminars and most importantly by maintaining a very high level of self-awareness when we step outside our own cultural boundaries. However managing cross-culturally is complex because real business issues are complex and often require more than a linear solution. So, how do we avoid the trap of over-simplifying the complexity of the issues faced by international teams?

Let's agree that there is more to understanding an international team than being aware of the diversity of national cultures represented by the members. We know from experience that there are key differences found on any team which may include gender, race, individual personality, cognitive and emotional intelligence, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Consulting to international teams and executives has taught me that over-emphasizing the national cultural differences found in a team can sometimes be too one sided. Understanding cultural difference is key but, alone, is not sufficient to achieve a highly performing team. Other factors include: the purpose for the team's existence, the influence of personality differences, the impact of culture, professional identities, the level of emotional intelligence, and the importance of a robust support system for the team.

Purpose of the team's existence

If we are involved in managing, coaching or participating in a team our first question should be: "what is the purpose of this team?" What brings the team together? Research has shown us that the secret to a strong team is a clear common purpose and identification of each member with that group task. Indeed the very definition of a "team" is a group of individuals working on a common purpose. Our first analysis of a team should start with looking at the reason for its existence. If the team is composed of members from different cultures, once we understand the answer to the question "what is this group trying to accomplish?" we can move on to examine the impact of different factors on the team dynamics.

The Influence of Personality Differences

One of the factors that became immediately apparent with the multinational Shanghai based team was that some of the greatest difficulties between team members had everything to do with individual personality differences and very little to do with culture. It came as a great relief to the team to recognize that "unpleasant" characters exist in all cultures. Much of the tension generated by some individuals on the team was a result of their acerbic personal style which had little to do with their native cultures. However, the team almost unconsciously had fallen into the "political correctness" trap and was trying to tolerate unacceptable behaviour because they assumed it to be culturally driven. Once the team realized that cultural difference is not an excuse for misbehaving or being inflexible it was as if a great weight had been removed from their collective shoulders. How did they come to this realization?

We used the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to examine the differences in personality style and to practice ways to make constructive use of the differences. Like similar personality indicators, the MBTI quickly enables a team to construct a "model" of personality preferences. In short order team members were able to recognize the contributions of the different personality "styles" and how they actually complement one another. They learned to respect the differences in "style" which they began to value as "strengths" which the team could leverage. The extraverts and the introverts gained new understanding of their differences. Likewise the team began to become aware of the profound differences, dictated by their genes through their personalities, in the way that they gather information, make decisions and structure their environment. During the refreshment breaks I heard several participants relate their newfound understanding to family situations. They discovered the patterns in their communication styles which they said would help them do a better job of understanding their spouses and children. In short, they acquired a new understanding of the importance of respecting personal differences. Can you think of a better framework to begin examining cultural differences?

The impact of culture

For the past many years authors on cross-cultural communication, such as Geert Hofstede, Edmund Hall, and Fons Trompenaars have illustrated the role that cross-cultural differences play within a team. Their work has provided us with the intellectual framework, the specific terms and the dimensions of culture to open our eyes to the differences in management style which are influenced by culture. The approach that I usually take with multicultural teamwork starts by helping the team members examine the values, beliefs and assumptions of their own native culture before they try to analyze a different culture. They quickly learn to see how geography, history and religion impact values, beliefs and assumptions which in turn shape the characteristic behaviour of a group. They build a model to understand the dimensions of their own culture and only when this is done they move on to examine the points of convergence and divergence with the other cultures represented in the team. The point is to learn to recognize and respect the differences. Only then can the team begin to "reconcile the dilemmas" – as advocated by Trompenaars – which can arise from the clash of cultural differences.

Professional Identities

The Shanghai team for the most part shared an engineering background – except for the CFO, the VP of Human Resources and the head of Marketing. As we worked through a team-building simulation these different professional identities began to become apparent in different approaches to problem solving. These "sub-divisions" of cultural identity that members bring to a team can be the source of many dilemmas that need to be reconciled. For instance, it is my experience that engineers, as a group, are very loyal to their profession (fellow engineers) and are very similar in their ways no matter their national culture or the company they work for. The same is no doubt true for other professional groups such as Finance. These are true cultural differences that need to be taken into account. Are there other differences that need to be considered?

Emotional Intelligence

I would like to suggest that the "emotional intelligence" of a team is an emerging factor that should be considered and developed. Solid research shows that teams whose members exhibit a high level of emotional intelligence come together faster and achieve higher levels of productivity more quickly than teams with less emotional intelligence. "Emotional contagion" is a very real issue in the life of teams – team members "catch" emotions from other team-members. We have all experienced teams of highly skilled individuals who seem eager to achieve something together only to see the team become corroded by politics, squabbling, and internal competition. With the Shanghai team we did not consider "emotional intelligence." Since then, I have come to believe that this new science is of vital importance and whenever appropriate I now introduce the assessment and development of emotional intelligence as a key component in our team-building consulting.

Support Systems

A Chinese engineer on the Shanghai team suggested, strongly, that we needed to crystallize our new understanding of high performance multicultural teams in the form of a "team charter". He actually wanted a document which would be signed by each team-member expressing their individual commitment to uphold the "charter". We learned a lot from his suggestion – he clearly recognized that in order to have a functional international team we need agreed guidelines on how to communicate, how to convey disagreement, how to approach project planning and budgets. The Chinese engineer brought up a vital point: no team can function at a high level without the support systems that it needs to achieve its purpose.

Global Leadership Competencies

I believe that leaders who manage multicultural teams (which frequently are "virtual teams:" whose members reside in different countries) need to have a clear understanding of the dimensions mentioned above. The global leader has to develop a new set of competencies to deal with the challenges of culture. These skills include understanding that they do not have to know all the answers – they need to be able to learn new solutions with and from their teams. They need to be ready to "reconcile" the ethical dilemmas that will invariably result from different cultural approaches. Above all they need the patience, experience, emotional resilience and sense of humour (which correlates with the ability to learn from their mistakes) in order to be able to manage the ambiguity inherent in conducting business across cultures. These skills are not necessarily taught in business schools. As for the team I referred to - physically based in Shanghai - they have now come together as a "high performance team" and continue to leverage the incredible synergies that arise from their individual differences.

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