

Cross-Cultural Effectiveness

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The ability to manage and work with people from other parts of the world is no longer considered a nice skill to have - it is a necessity. If we are to be successful in working in this global environment, our colleagues' and clients' beliefs, behaviors, and modes of interaction must be understood. The complexity of working as a team with people from other cultures calls for greater tolerance and respect of cultural differences. We also need to actively consider cultural implications as we work in other countries or on multicultural teams.

What is culture?

Let us try to articulate a basic understanding of culture. It is much more than poetry and folklore, or ballets and tribal dances. It is an all encompassing form or pattern of living. It is the basic ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that occur, simply because of the fact that people are members of a particular society. It is the collective programming of the mind; a system of values comprising broad preferences for one state of affairs above the other.

We could consider culture as a mental software, which is learned and not inherited, derived from one's social environment and not from one's genes. It is a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and habits unwittingly transferred from parents to their children, from teachers to their students, and from friends to friends.

Facets of culture include symbols, values, beliefs, emotions, laws, attitudes, norms, material possessions, aspirations, and perceptions. They manifest themselves through gestures, language, use of phrases, greetings, quality and timeliness of work, physical contact, eye contact, and hospitality. More subtly, we encounter cultural differences in motivations, attitudes toward money and leisure time, and when people are product-driven versus process-driven, or relationship-oriented versus result-oriented.

Consider these examples of how culture affects the way we work in teams and interact with clients.

Example 1: Gene was facilitating a week-long workshop in Pakistan. By the third day he had started to get moderately frustrated with the regular interruptions of calls to prayer. He didn't want to stop the calls to prayer, but just wanted to better schedule the workshop, because it was falling behind the agenda. He spoke to the senior client representative and explained the situation and the need for better scheduling. Nicely and politely, the client said, "Leave it with me, I will resolve this." Gene agreed. The next day, the client stood up at the start of the day and informed all participants that daily prayers were hereby cancelled. Gene and the participants were mortified.

Lesson: Gene had failed to understand the hierarchical nature of the business culture.

Example 2: Anne had a meeting in Tokyo, Japan with a colleague from her company. She was there to launch a new internal program. The meeting was scheduled for 3:00 pm, but the colleague did not show up until 4:00 pm. Undaunted, she explained the program, background, key requirements and possible issues. By 5:30 pm she had come to the end of her agenda. The colleague then went away for a few minutes and returned with a computer, which he connected to an LCD. He then said, "Let me tell you about our firm." Anne did not really want to know the operational details of the Japanese firm. She was jet lagged and wanted to go back to her hotel room. An hour and a half later, she had learned everything she could possibly learn about the Japanese firm and was sent on her way.

Lesson: Anne had failed to understand what success was all about. She was results-oriented - success for her meant agreement to implement the internal program within a certain timeframe. But her colleague was relationship-oriented. For him, success meant having established a working relationship with clear understanding and empathy for the Japanese firm.

Attending to cultural differences

To be effective in a cross-cultural environment requires understanding differences, being sensitive to a situation, and reacting in the appropriate manner. Self awareness, or knowing your own culture, is the first step to becoming cross-culturally effective. Ask yourself what roles and behaviors are displayed by members of your own culture and sub-culture. The next step is to consider the cultural preferences of the others working in your multicultural team. From the analysis of your own culture and the culture of the others working in your multicultural team, the third step is to adapt appropriate skills to be effective in the work environment. This requires fully internalizing these skills to not only avoid problems but to create cultural collaboration across the team members.

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