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Correspondence: ikarkazis@aegean.gr

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CROSS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND CONFLICT

Amos Drory

School Of Management

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Beer-Sheva, Israel

Abstract. The present article discusses the potential implications of cross-cultural differences on culturally diverse work teams. The major categories of work-related cross-cultural differences are first presented and communication difficulties between cultural groups are highlighted. It is suggested that culturally diverse teams are particularly prone to problems of communication and mutual understanding. Such problems may lead to difficulties, both in terms of group cohesion and in task oriented activities. The specific implications for different types of groups are considered. It is further suggested that, with proper awareness and training, cultural diversity may become an important asset rather than an obstacle in a group's effort to achieve its objectives.

Key words. Communication, conflict, cultural diversity, intercultural teams, teamwork

1. INTRODUCTION

The accelerating trend toward globalization in the present era has increasingly drawn our attention to issues of communication and collaboration across cultures. It is agreed that the understanding of cultural differences and the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively beyond cultural boundaries are becoming a key to the success of businesses and nations.

The purpose of the present article is to present some of the major dimensions of sociocultural variability and consider their potential impact on interaction and collaboration among members of different cultures operating in joint teams in the context of multinational task groups and in cases of international collaboration. This will be followed by several suggestions to promote the constructive management of multicultural terms.

There are numerous definitions of culture, yet no consensus definition has emerged within or across disciplines (Gudykunst & Lim, 1986). The choice of the appropriate definition of culture largely depends on the purpose of the discussion. When the practical issue of cross-cultural collaboration is at stake, it is perhaps best to define culture as a system of knowledge, shaped and constrained by the way the human brain acquires, organizes, and processes information and creates internal models of reality. This notion of culture as a perceptual organizing framework can serve as a useful point of departure in the following discussion of cross-cultural interaction.

2. DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL VARIABILITY

Social research suggests that culture shapes the way people behave, think, communicate, set priorities, and pass moral judgment. We shall first review some of the major aspects of cultural differences that may affect group interaction.

2.1. Social Behavior and Gestures

Hall (1959, 1969) provides a detailed account of cross-cultural differences in the basic social concepts that govern our social interactions, including personal space, time, physical contact, etc. Hall highlights differences among cultures in social gestures, expressions, and nonverbal communication. It is apparent that vast differences exist in these respects among cultures and societies. The following are some of the major areas in which differences were noted.

Space

The amount of personal space with which an individual is comfortable with in a public situation varies from several meters in some North European countries to none at all in most Middle Eastern societies. Physical proximity that is closer than what is expected by the cultural norm creates uncomfortable feelings and anxiety.

Time

Keeping time schedules is another issue on which cultures differ. Being late means a few moments for an American and a few days or weeks for a Middle-Eastern Bedouin. Obviously such differences in the concept of time may lead to considerable tension in cross-cultural interactions when meeting deadlines and scheduling meetings are concerned.

Privacy

Adler (1997) describes a case where Canadian business representatives conducted a business meeting with Persian Gulf officials. Since the Arab hosts allowed frequent interruptions from people and phone calls during the meeting, the Canadians concluded that their hosts were not interested in the transaction and discontinued their communication with their counterparts. Adler maintains that the incidence reflected cultural differences in the concept of a business meeting and in the perception of its appropriate circumstances.

Hall (1969) discusses personal space as another aspect of privacy. He suggests that cultures vary on the amount of space which the individual can expect to have around him without being intruded by another person. Hall suggests that contradicting expectations of personal space between members of different cultures may lead to considerable interpersonal tension.

Conflict Handling Styles

Rahim (1986) suggested five distinct styles of handling interpersonal conflict: Avoiding, Obliging, Dominating, Integrating, and Compromising. The styles are grouped along two dimensions: concern for others and concern for self. In terms of concern for self, Dominating and Integrating are high, while Obliging and Avoiding are low. Obliging and Integrating are high while Dominating and Avoiding are low in terms of concern for others.

Research on cross-cultural differences in conflict management is not sufficient. There are, however, several research indications suggesting that cultural differences clearly exist in terms of the inclination to use the various styles (Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Kozan K), 1989. Ting-Toomey, Gao, Trubisky, Yang, Kim, Ling in & Nishida, 1991).

2.2. Values and Goals

Hofstede's dimensions of sociocultural systems

Hofstede (1980, 1983) empirically derived four sociocultural dimensions from data gathered in over 40 countries:

Power Distance

Reflects the extent to which powerful members of a society accept the unequal distribution of power and rewards as normal characteristics of their society. Hofstede has shown that different societies exhibit different distributions of power in their organizational and social hierarchies, and that one can use power distance to characterize different societal cultures.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Reflects the importance of the individual versus the collectivity in different societies. At the individualistic end, the ties between individuals are, indeed, very loose, and people are supposed to look after their own self-interests. At the collectivist end, there are societies that put strong emphasis on social ties or bonds between individuals. People distinguish between their own ingroups (e.g., immediate relatives, clans, and members of one's organization) and outgroups (e.g., members from a different community or foreign country or people with whom one has less frequent contact). Employees of individualistic countries are more inner directed, whereas, in collectivist countries, individuals are more traditional and "other" directed. The United States considered the most individualistic country in the world. Other individualistic countries are mostly from Western Europe or from countries of Anglo European origin. Countries in the Asia Pacific region as well as many countries in South America are collectivist in their orientation.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Refers to a society's tolerance for uncertainties that arise in many situations and the extent to which they try to manage these situations by providing explicit and formal rules and regulations, by rejecting novel ideas, and by accepting without question the superordinate goals in organizational setting. The highest scores in uncertainty avoidance were found in Greece, Japan and in most of the Catholic countries in Latin America. Low scores were obtained in Hong Kong and Singapore. Countries, which are high on uncertainty avoidance, tend to be characterized by explicit and written rules and more structure.

Masculinity

Refers to the extent that dominant values in a society emphasize assertiveness, acquisition of money and status, and achievement of visible and symbolic organizational rewards. At the lower end of the scale, the emphasis is on quality of life and other non-materialistic and less tangible outcomes. Japan is the most "masculine" country in the world, followed by the German-speaking countries: Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Hofstede's dimensions offer an important theoretical framework for the prediction of many kinds of behaviors in cross-cultural contexts. They pertain to some of the more fundamental societal norms. Information on the above indicators with regard to a given society or culture provides important insight into the priorities and preferences of that society. Differences along these dimensions in a work team could lead to vast disagreements on the assessment of reality, on policy and action preferences, and on mutual perception and esteem of group members.

Emphasis on process versus goals

Another meaningful distinction that was suggested by Glenn and Glenn (1981) pertains to whether cultures emphasize process, or the ways to live, versus goals, or the ultimate purpose of human existence. The temporal orientation of people in process-oriented cultures is on the present, whereas it is on the future in cultures which emphasize goals.

Emphasis on people ideas or action

Glenn and Glenn (1981) suggested another distinction between societies - the emphasis is between people or actions. In societies where people are emphasized, the quality of interpersonal relationships is of crucial significance. In many of the Mediterranean nations, what one does is less important than whether one is a friend or an enemy. The focus is not on the idea as much as it is on the specific nature of the relationship involved. In contrast, for an Indian or for a member of, for example, the Communist party, ideology is of much more importance. It does not matter who the person is as long as he or she has the right idea. Finally, in cultures such as the United States, action, as opposed to reflection, is of great significance. What the person does is more important than who the person is or what the person says. Peters and Waterman (1988), for example, have emphasized a bias for action in organizational settings.

2.2. Information Processing

Hall's high-low context continuum

Hall (1976) maintains that cultural systems vary in the importance they place upon context in communication. A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded explicit transmitted part of message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the message is vested in the explicit code.

Abstractive versus associative cultures

The norms governing the processing of information differ from one culture to another (Glenn & Glenn, 1981). Abstractive cultures are governed by the rational model of cause and effect. In associative cultures people process information utilizing associations among events that may not have much logical basis.

Context is given much more weight in processing information. An affective intuitive approach to processing information is the predominant norm in associative cultures. Abstractive cultures, in contrast, process information relatively free of context. A vast amount of information is conveyed through mass media and related technological mechanisms, which are not dependent on the context for effective processing of information. A factual inductive approach appears to be used more frequently in these cultures. People attempt to understand an argument by processing numerous facts and are not particularly sensitive to the context in which the communication takes place.

It is the basic premise of this paper that the above cultural differences may lead to considerable difficulties in communication within multicultural work teams.

Before we examine the potential effect of each area discussed above on the functioning of work teams, we shall take a brief look at the basic dynamics associated with cross-cultural communication in general.

3. COMMUNICATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS

Communication is the exchange of meaning. It includes sending both verbal and non-verbal messages. The communication loop consists of three basic components: a sender, a receiver, and a message. The message is transmitted either intentionally or unintentionally. The processing of the

message by the receiver involves at least two procedures: perception and interpretation. Cross-cultural communication pertains to the case where the sender and the receiver are members of different cultural groups.

Miscommunication occurs when the receiver does not receive the intended message. It may result from either misperception of the message or misinterpretation of it due to human perceptual and cognitive limitations. There are many specific causes for this phenomenon.

In cross-cultural situations, the potential for miscommunication is much greater due to differences in values, perceptions, and cognitive interpretations between different cultures.

In the following paragraphs, we shall discuss some of the specific pitfalls in cross-cultural communication in view of the cultural differences discussed above.

Cross-cultural misperceptions

There are several characteristics of the human perceptual mechanism that affect the cross cultural communication process.

1. Perception is selective. Normally, the receiver is faced with an overload of stimuli. We screen out a certain amount of this and allow only selected information through our perceptual screen.
2. Perception is culturally determined. We learn to see the world in a certain way based on our cultural background.
3. Perception tends to be consistent. Once we see something in a particular way we tend to be consistent in seeing it that way again and again.
4. Perception is inaccurate. We see some things that do not exist and we do not see others, which do. We perceive what we expect to perceive according to our cultural map.

Cross-cultural misinterpretations

Interpretation is the process of giving meaning to observations and often using them as a guide to behavior. One of the basic elements of interpretation is categorizing. People tend to group perceived images into familiar categories that help them simplify their environment and react to it effectively. The association of perceived items with categories may vary from one culture to another (e.g., placing a smoking person in a category of lower class). A second element in this process involves the attachment of meaning to the categories or stereotyping.

The process of interpretation is culture-bound and, as such, is subject to cross-cultural misinterpretations. Both the categories and the meaning we attach to them are based on cultural background.

Misinterpretations may occur as a result of wrongly applying the norms of one's own culture to interpretation of behavior of another culture. Another source of misinterpretation may stem from projected similarity, assuming that people are more similar to one than they really are. Thus, people in international encounters tend to assume that others are basically similar to themselves and thus are encouraged to judge their behavior by applying their own norms.

3.1. Cross-Cultural Differences a Work Team Effectiveness

The cross cultural differences reviewed above and the communication problems that may result suggest that cultural diversity within work teams may have some potential disadvantages:

- a. It is more difficult to agree on the perception and interpretation of facts and observations.
- b. Interpersonal communication is more difficult and is particularly prone to misunderstandings.
- c. It is more difficult to reach agreement among team members.
- d. The overall level of stress could be relatively high.

It is therefore essential that multicultural groups should invest some of their group effort in attempts to identify potential pitfalls and to take preparatory measures to minimize the above problems. Moreover, whenever possible, they should turn cultural diversity from a potential handicap into an operational advantage. In the following paragraphs we shall look more specifically at the potential impact of cultural diversity on group behavior and then consider some of the possible approaches for managing such groups.

It is commonly accepted that the success of task-oriented teams depends largely on two major aspects; namely, (1) the team maintenance processes; and (2) The team's goal attainment activities (Stogdill, 1974; Blake and Mouton, 1978).

The Group maintenance function includes the basic processes necessary to ensure the participation of the group members and effective interaction among them. The relevant processes include communication, leadership, and trust-building. Task-oriented functions are those associated directly with the attainment of group goals and objectives. It may be suggested that the maintenance function is a prerequisite to goal attainment. In order for the group to reach its goals, it must ensure

that its members maintain healthy and positive relationships and that they are capable of collaborating smoothly.

We shall now examine the expected impact of the various categories of cross-cultural differences discussed earlier in this paper on the above group functions.

Social behavior and gestures

Since differences in behavioral aspects are probably the most visible, they are the ones with the most immediate social impact. Different concepts of time, space, and conflict behavior may easily lead to patterns of behavior which may be regarded as irritating and offensive. This effect is particularly likely in view of the tendency to overlook cultural differences and to assume that others are more similar to one than they actually are. On the other hand, since such differences pertain to external levels of behavior, they are not expected to lead to fundamental conflicts over direction and policy. It may be assumed that such behavior may predominantly affect maintenance aspects such as quality of relationship and mutual trust and respect. If, however, the group common goals and objectives are important enough to its members, they may choose not to let such cross-cultural differences interfere with goal attainment efforts.

Values and Goals

This is perhaps the most difficult category of cross-cultural differences in terms of potential communication problems. Values are normally well internalized and are deep rooted in one's self. Values guide the individual perception, behavior, and the judgment of others, at both conscious and unconscious levels. As such, values are not easily changed. Moreover, since values affect our views of many specific actions, decisions, and interpretations of events, the potential for disagreement and conflict can spread into many facets of interpersonal encounters. In intercultural task-oriented teams, value differences could affect the group in terms of both maintenance and goal attainment. Value differences may lead to considerable difficulties, particularly if consensus on a joint set of goals and means of attaining them is crucial for group effectiveness. Team members are not likely to accommodate their value-related views and preferences. In many cases they are not even aware of the relations between their cross-cultural differences and the resulting conflict. Considerable difficulties in decision-making and goal-setting may result from this situation.

Information processing style

Differences in the basic assumptions underlying information-processing are also very central to the individual's self. As such, they may easily lead to lack of respect and to mistrust among different cultural groups within the same team. Such differences may be detrimental to the group's

effort to attain its goals. Yet, in this case, potential disagreements center on the means rather than the end, and the negative effects will be less severe than in the case of value differences. On the other hand, groups with a long lifespan may discover the advantages of having a variety of data processing styles. Such groups may consider their different thinking styles as diverse resources and encourage their members to express their diversity.

The actual effect of cross-cultural aspects on team behavior and effectiveness may also depend on the nature and characteristics of the team or group. The relevant group characteristics may be described along two dimensions:

- a. the structural bond among the group members (being a part of the same organization versus coming from different organizations).
- b. the expected time frame of the relationship (short-term interaction centered around a single business transaction versus long term interaction without an indefinite time frame).

Obviously, the interpretation of the two dimensions is to some extent subjective. A company representative engaging in a short-term business transaction with a representative of another company may consider the present interaction as a long-term one, being aware of the high probability for future potential transactions. The two may also experience a strong structural bond, since they both belong to the same professional group even though they represent different organizations.

These two dimensions are significant in terms of the team's ability and motivation to handle cross-cultural differences. A group with a strong structural bond normally has some common organizational culture and some group identity due to the fact that it belongs to the same organization. This will normally lead to a sense of common goals and common destiny. Such groups are more likely to have a greater motivation to remove any barriers to their smooth cooperation that may be due to cross-cultural differences. Members in such groups may take advantage of their common identity to counter-balance the sense of alienation and resentment, that can be associated with cross-cultural differences.

The time perspective of the group directly affects its motivation to deal with issues of maintenance and social relations. Groups with a short-term perspective are naturally more concerned with goal attainment and less prepared to invest time on processes that may only yield long-term benefits. Groups with long-term perspective are more concerned with the need to invest effort in the quality of their basic interpersonal processes in order to ensure their long term-functioning.

Such groups may have a stronger motivation to develop effective communication and trust. They will, therefore, be more inclined to attempt to overcome cross-cultural differences. At the same time, short-term perspective groups may have a relative advantage in that their members may be inclined to show greater tolerance toward cultural differences in terms of social behavior and gestures,

knowing that the situation is very temporary. Such tolerance may help to overcome the negative effects of cultural differences in social behavior and gestures.

4. MANAGING MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

Multicultural teams are becoming increasingly more prevalent, both within and between organizations and nations. Too often, however, the cultural diversity within task teams is ignored by the parties involved (Adler, 1997). Furthermore, overlooking or denying cultural differences is often encouraged. In many instances, acknowledging cultural differences is associated with simplistic primitive and immoral thinking. Those who recognize the diversity within groups are considered racist, prejudiced, ethnocentric, and unprofessional. The prevailing norms, especially in North America, encourage managers to blind themselves to gender, race, and ethnicity, to see people as individuals, and to judge them solely on the basis of their professional skills. Adler (1997) suggests that cultural recognition should not be confused with value judgment and discrimination. Recognizing cultural differences within a working team is productive and helpful. It does not imply that one group is better than the other. It allows the group to identify both advantages and shortcomings in its smooth operation. Ignoring cultural diversity leads to the expectation that people from other cultures will become projections of ourselves. This expectation is false and misleading and is detrimental to any serious attempt to build and maintain a bridge between cultural groups.

Finally, several suggestions may be offered to promote the constructive management of multicultural teams:

Group maintenance

A major key to the success of multicultural teams lies in the team's awareness of its cultural diversity and its perceived implications. In order to establish the desirable predisposition, the following maintenance steps are recommended.

1. Start with a sincere attempt to recognize and acknowledge the cultural differences within the group and become aware of their implications. This awareness should be free of value judgment, and should stress the legitimacy of cultural differences.
2. Make a special attempt to highlight the elements that unite the group, such as affiliation with the same organization, sharing common organizational culture or heritage, sharing the same values, or having the same set of goals and objectives.

3. Devote time and effort to create a positive atmosphere and develop interpersonal ties. Initiate social gatherings and other opportunities for team members to get to know each other under favorable circumstances.
4. Develop stress-reduction mechanisms. Maintain high sensitivity to potential social tension and stress arising from cross-cultural problems. Develop the sensitivity of team members to such possibilities.

Data gathering and diagnosis

The group should highlight its cultural diversity for purposes of data-gathering and decision-making. At some stage, task oriented teams are engaged in data analysis and diagnosis. Since different cultures are sensitive to different types of information, such as, people, ideas, action, goals vs. process, etc., cultural diversity may be utilized as an advantage. Encourage different members to contribute their points of view to the information-gathering process. As a result of this approach, a richer and more diverse body of knowledge will become available to the team and different culture groups will have a sense of pride in their contribution.

Decision-making

As suggested earlier, cultural diversity is related to the style of information-processing. Here it can be turned into an advantage if team members are encouraged to pursue their natural line of thinking and contribute different points of view to the decision process. The risk of group-think (Janis, 1982) is minimized under such circumstances.

It is clearly desirable for multicultural groups to have a dedicated facilitator who can assume responsibility for handling the above items. A group member with the relevant inclination and talent may informally assume such a role. Alternatively, the group's formal leader may assume it. In some cases, an external consultant may be brought into the picture for that purpose. In cases of groups with a long-term perspective, it is expected that the entire group will eventually adopt a supportive and constructive culture of the nature described above.

5. CONCLUSION

The need to overcome cross-cultural differences in work teams is a challenge that many present and future companies will have to face increasingly more often. The essence of this

challenge is how to turn a sensitive and potentially problematic situation from an operational liability to a competitive advantage. The present article considers the relevant behavioral problems associated with the communication process in multicultural teams and proposes some directions to overcome the difficulties and to actually take advantage of the cultural diversity in the group process. More systematic study of team communication and collaboration across cultures is needed in order to further contribute to the solution of the issues discussed in this paper.

Table 1. Dimensions of Cultural Variability**Social Behavior**

Space
Time
Privacy
Conflict Management

Values and Goals

Power Distance
Individualism vs. Collectivism
Uncertainty avoidance
Masculinity
Process vs. Goals
People Ideas Action

Information Processing

High vs. Low context
 Abstractive vs. Associative

Table 2. Effective Management of Multicultural Work Teams

- Increase awareness to cultural differences within the group.
- Establish group goals and mutual concern.
- Enhance group cohesiveness.
- Develop stress reduction mechanisms.
- Encourage diversity in data-gathering and diagnosis.
- Utilize the cultural diversity in decision-making processes.

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