

## **Addressing Communication Issues When Managing Multicultural Teams**

By Chad Lewis

The Intercultural Consulting Group

With the growth in globalization, managers increasingly need to work in culturally diverse groups. The good news is that people from culturally diverse backgrounds will bring fresh ideas and new approaches to problem solving. The challenge, however, is that they will also bring different understandings and expectations regarding group dynamics and communication. The question becomes how a manager can effectively work with a team, being attentive to the diversity while still creating the structure required for success. There are many tools that can help create a productive multicultural team. One of the most important tools is good communication skills. Why is this important? In short, because it is forever. Once something is communicated, we can qualify it, we can contextualize it, but we can never undo it. Further, good communication skills are primary in establishing, cultivating, and maintaining strong working relationships.

What about language skills? Many of today's managers are bi-lingual or better. Certainly knowing how to speak another language is advantageous; if working in Tokyo, knowledge of Japanese will be invaluable. However, effective communication goes well beyond structural knowledge of a language. This social component of communication is not only a critical aspect of cross-cultural communication but is also often the hardest aspect to learn. A simple example is in the United States we will often say, "How are you?" Functionally, this is just a greeting. Literally, however, this is an open-ended question regarding a person's well being for anyone not versed in colloquial American. These sorts of disparities exist in every communication system and they are often much more complex than the previous example. Further, this social component will change depending on where the language is spoken.

Moreover, good communication can often be an issue in a homogenous group, even if it is just a conversation between two people (for example, think about misunderstandings with your spouse, child or partner). The problem is, of course, that communication failures are severely compounded when working with a multicultural group.

The question then becomes so how does one address the challenge of cross-cultural communication or communication with folks from different backgrounds? To begin, let's first

look at some of the facts about communication. Communication essentially is a symbolic activity; it is a series of symbols used to represent things. Communication is a process of coding and then decoding these symbols. Both speaker and listener are important to the process. Further, communication takes place at varying levels of awareness. You can communicate consciously but you will also communicate subconsciously (body position, eye contact, dress, smell, etc.).

Another important item to remember is that intention is not a necessary condition for communication. One does not always communicate what one intends to communicate. A simple example of this could be a wave to a friend on the street and a taxi sees you and stops. In this instance, the communication with your friend was intentional and the communication with the taxi was unintentional.

Other differences in communication style can include the organization of a language itself. For example, there will be differences in components in language; in surface grammar, different rules and different structures apply. Between different languages, there may not be corresponding words. Further, even if both people are speaking a common language, such as English, identical words may have different meanings. For example, “lift” in American is a verb, which means to provide a ride; in British it is a noun for elevator. A “nick” in American is a noun for a small cut; in British it is a verb which means to steal.

Differences in communication are not limited to the verbal component of language. Non-verbal communication components can also differ greatly. The following are some of the many ways in which non-verbal communication can vary. One may find differences in kinesics (or body movement) such as body language, gestures, eye contact, etc. Even gestures as simple as head nodding can be different such as the Indian head wobble (which, depending where you are in India can mean either yes or no). Another area of non-verbal communication is proxemics, which is how people use personal space or personal space requirements. There can also be differences in intonations, which is the way people use their voice to send non-verbal messages.

These are just some of the many ways in which communication style can vary between cultures and as a result communicating with a culturally diverse team can be very challenging. However all is not lost! There are steps that one can take as a manager to help to communicate with a team effectively. In my experience, the two most important things to remember when working with diverse groups are:

- One, remember to acknowledge differences in communication style. This is the most important step and the most critical for any manager to be effective.
- Two, have patience. Things will not run as smoothly in a multicultural group as they will in a homogenous one. A little bit of patience can save a ton of stress and headache for you and your team.

Here are some other guides to keep in mind when involved with cross-cultural communication:

- Remember one or more people may not be speaking in their native tongue.
- Try to be adaptable and open to new ways of communicating or using language.
- Try to be self-reflective; communication is a two-party system; try to be aware of your contribution to communication difficulties.
- Do not rely on stereotypes or consultants who are experts in country X. Chances are that country X has a wide range of communication styles. The best way to find out about communication norms of a particular group is to speak with someone who is from the specific area or city. For example, chances are that you would not send someone from LA to explain to a foreign client how to communicate effectively in New York.
- When working with a diverse group, use turn-taking. Some people will be more comfortable in the group and seem more aggressive. Use turn-taking as a way to give voice to others in a group.
- Use multiple forms of communication. After a meeting, call and/or follow up with an e-mail or memo.
- Avoid using statements like “do you understand?” Instead, ask someone to go over their assignment with you. This allows you to better gauge their understanding of their role.

In sum, more and more projects are going to include multicultural groups and collaborations. As a manager, leading a cross-cultural or diverse group can be a challenge, but it can also be the source of fresh perspectives and ideas. The dynamic of effective cross-cultural communication can mean the difference between the success and failure of such a project.

---

## References and Recommended Reading

Adler, Gordon (1995) "The case of the floundering Expatriate" Harvard Business Review (July-August)

Agar, Michael. (1994) "Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation". New York: Morrow

Bennett, Janet M. & Milton J. (2004) "Developing Intercultural Sensitivity: An Integrative Approach to Global and Domestic Diversity." In Landis et. al., Eds, Handbook of Intercultural Training. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Kim, Min-Sunkim. (2002) "Non-Western Perspectives on Human Communication". Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

---

## About the Author:

Chad Lewis has experience in both the intercultural and the engineering world. He has a graduate degree in Intercultural Relations (cultural anthropology). He lectures on Intercultural Communications, Cultural Adaptation and Cross-Cultural Team Building in Boston. He has traveled extensively and has worked in the United States, Italy, Austria and Japan. You can reach him at via e-mail at [chad@luthais.com](mailto:chad@luthais.com) or at The Intercultural Consulting Group. <http://www.luthais.com>