

## **Managing and Working with Diverse Teams**

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One of the catch phrases in business today is “out of the box thinking”. Today more and more project teams are comprised of people from different backgrounds, who will often bring “out of the box thinking” with fresh ideas and new approaches to the workplace. These modern, diverse teams have a better chance of creating unique solutions and out-performing homogenous teams. The challenge is that diverse teams will also bring a diversity of understandings and expectations regarding teamwork and process. With a multicultural team, it can be difficult to replicate the exact conditions in which each member is most comfortable, and thereby most productive. Still, good management practices can leverage the advantages of diversity while addressing the difference in backgrounds.

Why is it important to consider each team member’s background? In a working group, diverse team members will bring different understandings and experiences in implementing and conducting their work. The contrast in knowledge and experience can lead to disparities, which have the potential to compromise overall team performance. It is important to remember Ivan Dale Steiner’s much-referenced 1972 treatise, Group process and productivity, which states:

Actual team productivity = Potential productivity – Losses due to faulty process.

To explain further, for managers, much time is spent on assessing project demands - the constraints placed on the team by the task, the resources - the abilities and tools of the team members and the process - which includes the group relations and interaction. If the process or group interaction is compromised by the inability to address differences, the productivity of the entire team, no matter how good the individual members are, will be compromised.

So how does one create an inclusive environment that allows the team to leverage the diversity and realize its full potential? In short, how does one manage a multicultural team? One of the first steps is recognizing the team composition. Nancy Adler in her book International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior (2002) talks about four types of teams,

homogenous, token, bi-cultural and multicultural. She describes the characteristics of each as follows:

- A homogenous team is one where all the members are from a similar background.
- In a token team, all but one member of a team comes from the same background.
- A bi-cultural team has members from two distinctly different backgrounds.
- Finally, a multicultural team is one where members come from three or more different backgrounds.

While management of each of these teams will be different, one common objective is to create an environment where each team member's contribution is recognized and valued. This can be difficult. For example in token teams, the minority member is often in an unfamiliar setting and will be uncomfortable in the group. Ensuring that the minority member has a voice and is comfortable contributing to the project must be a priority. Conversely, the minority member could become the dominant voice in a team. In this case, the priority must be to ensure the rest of the team still has a voice. Similarly, in a bi-cultural team, a manager must strive to create an environment where there is not a dominant group. Last, in a multicultural team, the objective is to create an environment in which all members are recognized. In all cases, the intention is to work towards a balance between all team members.

One of the challenges of working with a diverse group is that for at least some team members the defined processes for interaction will vary, which can be the source of much angst. Some other areas where managers may see problems include: social norms, chronemics (the use of time), stereotyping, issues of trust and of course, communication.

Trust issues are huge in diverse teams and the problem often relates to unfamiliarity. The unfamiliarity can relate to the process, to the environment, to the expectations of themselves and of others in the group, and even to something as simple as the food. For example, in the United States, it is very common for coffee to be prepared for morning meetings. If, however, you are working abroad and attend your first morning meeting expecting to find coffee and instead find nothing, this may cause you irritation and consequently affect your ability to perform at your best. In a case such as this, this would also be a 'First Impression:' your first impression of the working environment and as well as your hosts first impression of you.

Variations in social norms are often a challenge for people working in diverse teams. In some locations, you will find that it is common to socialize prior to or after meetings and that

a high emphasis is placed on the personal rapport of the group. In contrast, there are settings where it is highly unusual for team members to socialize outside of work. It is difficult to predict what you will encounter when working in a new environment but just being aware that there may be differences is invaluable.

Time can also present issues when managing teams and the challenges of chronemics and process are often related. In some settings, meetings will begin on time and strictly adhere to the agenda. In other settings, meetings may not begin for 15 or 20 minutes after the planned time and the agenda could be seen more as a guide from which deviation and tangents are encouraged. This type of variety can be very damaging to the group process. Further, it can also be a catalyst for stereotyping. “The people from X are so disorganized; they never stay on topic.” “Those people are so unfriendly, they just want to work.” “Would it kill those X to get to a meeting on time?” “The X are so uptight, they are always watching the clock.”

With all of these concerns, the increased challenges of working with diverse teams may seem to outweigh the benefits. However, there are many tools for effective multicultural team management.

Strong leadership is one tool of successful multicultural teams. This is a key component for successful project management in any kind. However, with diverse teams, strong leadership is even more important. The leader must understand the difficulties inherent in working with a diverse team and be able to convey this when the team does not function in the same way as a homogenous team. The leader must also be able to anticipate conflicts within the team and when conflicts do occur, the leader must be prepared to address them.

Awareness of diversity is a critical tool for addressing issues within a team. Differences within a group may not always be apparent and it can be easy for managers to overlook the diversity. It is important to remember that differences within a team may not be related to just obvious distinctions such as culture but also can include variables like, age, gender, social/economic background and education. In short, both noticing and acknowledging the diversity within their teams will provide a powerful tool for managers.

The following are some additional tools proposed by Nancy Adler (2002). Focus on task-related selections when assigning team member roles. Try to avoid selecting roles based on gender or culture; rather, select roles based on a team member’s abilities. Do not minimize

differences in culture or background. Rather, encourage understanding and respect the diversity within the team. Strive towards creating mutual respect between team members. Acknowledge each member's contributions and accomplishments. Ensure the team remains aware of the project's deliverable. Establish a vision for the project that transcends team member differences. Work towards equalizing each team member's influence within the group process by minimizing dominance by any one member or group. Positive feedback and encouragement should be given; do not dwell on failures and celebrate success.

Finally, defining a culture or central theme the group can call its own is often a good way to encourage teamwork. Establishing team goals and using team-building exercises are two examples of encouraging relationships to develop within the team. This can allow members to grow together and function more cohesively.

As businesses become more global, we will encounter an increase in team diversity. There is no question that these diverse teams will have more potential for problems and failures than homogenous teams. However, adapting to the diversity of a team rather than trying to force the team into a cookie-cutter model will allow the teams to function more effectively. This approach will also allow these teams the opportunity to create unique solutions and to think outside the box.

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