



# HIGH PERFORMANCE IN CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS

**THE MYRIAD WORKING STYLES AND PERSPECTIVES THAT CROSS-CULTURAL TEAM MEMBERS BRING TO THE TABLE ARE A HUGE BENEFIT AND BONUS, AND NOT A DISADVANTAGE, SAYS DEEPAK MOHLA**

**W**orking in cross-cultural teams can be challenging. For instance, a MNC in the Far East would have more people in "controlling roles" that focus strongly on outputs, systems and delivering results, etc. On the other hand, there would be far less people displaying "exploring roles" such as that of a creator-innovator, explorer-promoter and assessor. The situation of the same MNC in the West would be reverse; with less people in the controlling and more in the exploring roles. Consequently, conflicts could easily arise if people from both these offices decide to work in the same team. For example, it so happened that an organisation with a multi-cultural team of managers was evidently facing frustrating and less productive interactions. Differences in individual value systems,

educational backgrounds and work experience impacted the team's approach to problems and decision-making. Interestingly, the team realised that when similar interactions took place via a conference call, the outcomes were very productive. Not only were they able to achieve the objectives of the meeting, the team members could also explain and understand each other's perspectives better. Because they were not interacting face to face, they paid more attention to the each other's ideas and also came better prepared for the conference calls. The intercultural barriers that inhibited each team member from clearly advocating his/her thoughts, such as negative body language of other

managers, distractions, interruptions etc. were not present over the wire. Organisations, today, are spread across the globe and people work in multi-cultural teams, either in the same office or across borders. Issues can and do arise in areas such as approach to management,

## HR TRENDS

expectations, decision-making, planning, conflict resolution and communication styles. It is paramount that clear lines of communication are promoted and cross-cultural misunderstandings are minimised if such multi-cultural teams are to function effectively.

Whilst there are huge benefits of multi-cultural teams, working with people from different backgrounds is not always straightforward. A key area of concern is the method of communication in inter-cultural environments. Misinterpretations can often creep in; even mildly sarcastic comments said in jest may be misinterpreted by a team member in another country and cause conflicts. To prevent this, teams should be encouraged to clarify with each other through paraphrasing or by asking questions. For example, restating a point and then asking - "Is that what you meant?" or "Let me see if I understand your point of view..."

Information gaps are also areas

of concern, especially when working in virtual teams. It is important that every team member is on the same wavelength in terms of the information they possess about the issues being discussed; decision-making for a virtual team is also a crucial team activity as there may be a great deal of divergence and disagreement on the right course of actions.

Work-styles are a defining factor for intercultural differences. Some cultures foster individual thinking and offer rewards for individual contributions—like the Americans for instance. While in other cultures, people are uncomfortable with independence on the job and prefer to be tied to the apron strings of the boss in decision

making.

To evolve and create high performing cross-cultural teams, such key issues need to be understood. Sensitisation of organisations with behaviours that influence such issues is also important. What helps organisations in this scenario is to have defined stages of team formation and development that can drive high-performance. Team formation starts with individual members. As individuals, members may have low levels of mutual understanding and trust that restricts individual and organisational learning. Efforts should be made to build a shared understanding across the team. The next stage is to facilitate team interaction. Team members collaborate to create diagnostic concepts, which explain why issues exist, and jointly create and evaluate strategies to solve them and decide the way forward. Finally, all strategies are evaluated against their pros and cons. This leads to an empowered, capable and confident high-performing cross

cultural team.

Anecdotal and research evidence demonstrates that there are real benefits to groups of people from different cultural backgrounds working together. It is important to be mindful of the fact that the purpose of managing such teams is to increase diversity and not to enforce a uniform way of working. The myriad working styles and perspectives that cross-cultural team members bring to the table are a huge benefit and bonus, and not a disadvantage. Appropriate sensitisation of the managers with behaviours conducive to high performance in cross-cultural environments and development of team members against the same would ensure maximum returns to the performance of a multicultural and faceted team.

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