

Cross cultural leadership

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Nowadays the organizations of all over the world are in touch and connected with each other. The national boundaries and barriers have been almost brought down due to the globalization and the technology of our time.

The exchange of human factor and skilled personnel among organizations is everyday more common. Immigration is another factor that helps to have people from different cultures in the same organizations. As a consequence, the modern organizations are having a rich diversity of persons of different nationalities and the interaction among them is unavoidable.

According to Hofstede (1991) people of different nationalities have different mental programs, which build different perceptions of what happens. The diverse points of view or perceptions of the people can bring to the organization disagreements and conflicts due to the multicultural interaction. I intended with my paper, to analyze the existence of work teams in the organizations formed by persons of different nationalities or different cultural backgrounds and to explain how the cultural differences can be overcome in order to have a good performance.

One of the main consequences of the process of internationalization among organizations is the increasing exposure of its members to people who have different cultures. According to Schein (1992) culture is a theory, a mental model or a set of joint understandings that provide a particular and special vision of how the world works. Culture is a tacit knowledge acquired through socialization with the environment. Since culture is a tacit knowledge, it is imbedded in ourselves.

The culture implies a certain way of solving problems; people of different cultures solve similar problems in different ways (Hofstede, 1980/2001: 9).

He defines culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.

According to Peterson (2007) examples of collective programming include particular languages and the forms of emotional expression most typical or acceptable in particular societies, is characteristic of particular groups or categories of people. On the other hand, examples of individual programming include ways in which a particular person uses language or expresses emotion, is a consequence of personal makeup and experience.

National cultures may be reflected in typical personality characteristics (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004). The culture of every nation plays an important role in the relations between the organizations and the persons in the international atmosphere. According to Trompenars (1993) national culture influences the behavior of the persons in the organizations. The managers of the organizations have to be careful with their human factor because is the most important asset of the organization. It is more likely to have a problem related to human controversies than technical matters. Sometimes it is forgotten an essential component for any business; the human factor (Trompenars, 1993).

The study of cultural differences is essential to understand the relations between people in the organizations and to improve the performance of multicultural teams. A team is a small group of people with complementary and specific skills, which are interdependent among each other and that are

committed to the same goal (Smith, 1973). Work teams generate a synergy that results in superior performance than the sum of individual contributions.

In order to perform effectively, the work teams depend on its ability of sharing the information and knowledge that is possessed individually to the others members of the team. The essence of the work teams is to turn the individual knowledge into a collective knowledge. The more fluid is the flow of information the better the performance of the team will be.

The individual features of the members of the team will affect the team performance such as their cultural backgrounds. For instance, regarding of the type of task executed by the teams the level of performance might vary if the team members come from different cultures. In this sense multicultural teams will be more effective in tasks that require a diversity of perspectives.

One aspect that is important to consider in the multicultural teams is the organizational context. According to Larkey (1996) depending on how diverse in culture is the organization; the perception of the differences of the members of the team will vary. This means that the organizational context will affect the performance of the teams that have members of different nationalities. Osland and Bird (2000) describe the importance of paying attention to and processing cultural paradoxes; that is, incidents or patterns that are counter-predicted by an understanding of the overall cultural dimensions.

Multicultural teams take more time to consolidate than normal teams. Evidence shows, according to Watson (1993) that cultural diversity in teams make more difficult the processes of consolidation in the short term.

Moreover, it takes more time to the multicultural team to get a collective way of thinking than to a normal team because of the differences of communication and interaction when facing incidents or problems. When the team members have different expectations of how the team operates, it will be more likely of having conflicts and the capacity of setting shared norms will be more difficult.

Based on the previous problematic generated by having persons with different cultural backgrounds and nationalities in the organizations, it is necessary to look how to overcome these problems and more important what is necessary to do, in order to have an effective multicultural team in the organization.

Some authors suggest that in order to make effective a team with persons of different cultures, it is necessary to create personal and organizational conditions that allow enhancing the performance of those teams. In order to have an effective multicultural team, the members have to be able to work with a diverse type of persons and the organizational context have to value and reward the differences of such a team.

In order to generate an added value when using multicultural teams, Distefano and Maznevski (2000) suggest that it is necessary to map the characteristics of each of the members of the team and see how they impact on the team performance. Also, to generate bridges that allows a better communication and understanding of the diversity of perspectives to take into consideration. Finally, integrating differences, by monitoring carefully the participation of the team members in agreements and decision-making.

The literature and research are limited regarding strategies to overcome the differences of the multicultural teams. Evidence of teams that had positive results turned out to have the following features:

They had people in the teams with experience in other cultures, fact that helped improving those persons sensibility in cultural differences. They built a global culture through frequent international assignments of their employees. Exchange of employees to other countries among organizations, have helped to acquire intercultural experience in the daily work of the persons.

Some teams that performed well showed evidence of having a leader in charge of facilitating the communication and interaction among the different members of the team. In order to overcome the cultural differences, the leader or mediator has to be able to perceive the peculiarities in the teams, the process of adaptation, facilitating agreements of the way the team works and comprehending the different styles of work.

Consequently, international exposure and openness in the organizations have facilitated the diversity of cultures in the organizations and as a consequence, the so-called multicultural teams. It is necessary to give importance to these teams that are formed by persons with different cultural backgrounds or from different nationalities. Having these kinds of teams is not a preference or choice but a reality happens in the present and the organizations have to know how to deal with this problematic if they want to adapt and survive to these changes and the possible controversies that can be generated of having cultural differences in the organization.

Most of the organizations do not take into consideration the differences generated by having teams made of persons with different nationalities and have only policies for expatriates. The organizations that wish to do well need to understand the peculiarities of the multicultural teams of work in order to come up with strategies to improve their performance.

Moreover, policies about cultural awareness should be spread among the organization. Proper training must be given to all the members of the organization to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings with each other when having a cross-cultural interaction. Training people to become aware in multicultural issues is difficult, however recent evident proves that is possible to consolidate a team with such characteristics. As an example, socialization and international exposure have proved to be effective strategies to become more acquainted to the cultural differences of the members of the team.