

# Managing and motivating cross-cultural employees

[Psychology](#), [Behaviorism](#)



Why managers may face difficulties when managing employees in a cross-cultural context? In today's world, issues linked to a cross-cultural context are mainly raised because of the internationalization and globalization of the economy. Helped by many free trade agreements or some emerging countries, numerous firms have established new offices and factories in countries all around the world.

The questioning on the cross-cultural context has been raised because of the problems that many managers faced in the country they were sent to. In *Expansion*<sup>1</sup>, a management/strategy magazine in Mexico, we could read in the July 6th 2005 issue the story of Donald Gleason, a U. S. factory manager who moved to Mexico in order to raise the productivity of his firm factory in the State of Mexico.

He apparently was not able to understand main cultural points and his management was a complete failure which led to a 500. 000 \$ loss for his company. In the following essay, we will present the origin of the problems, trying to identify the causes. Our aim will not be to find answers to these problems, only to understand their nature.

In *Developing Cultural Understanding*<sup>2</sup> Tina Matikainen and Carolyn B. Duffy present us a definition of culture: The culture in which each of us lives influences and shapes our feelings, attitudes, and responses to our experiences and interactions with others. Because of our culture, each of us has knowledge, beliefs, values, views, and behaviors that we share with others who have the same cultural heritage. These past experiences, handed down from generation to generation, influence our values of what is

attractive and what is ugly, what is acceptable behavior and what is not, and what is right and what is wrong. Our culture also teaches us how to interpret the world.

From our culture we learn such things as how close to stand to strangers, when to speak and when to be silent, how to greet friends and strangers, and how to display anger appropriately. Because each culture has a unique way of approaching these situations, we find great diversity in cultural behaviors throughout the world. According to this definition, culture is made of all that defines our background and this is exactly why, as it is stated, we find great diversity in cultural behaviors throughout the world and this is the exact reason why managers may face cross-cultural problems.

As they have different cultural i. e. different knowledge, beliefs, values, views and behaviors, they will not have the same approach regarding a work, a problem, a situation. According to DuPraw and Axner<sup>3</sup> (1997) there are six fundamental patterns of Cultural Difference: Communication Styles, Attitude towards conflict, Approaches to completing tasks, Attitudes towards disclosure, Approaches to knowing. From a culture to another, even if they share the same language, the meaning of words change and doesn't convey the same ideas and the importance of non-verbal communication is not the same. Conflict, depending on the culture, can be seen as a bad or good thing.

Western countries often consider conflicts as being undesirable and often do all that is possible to tackle the issues immediately, whereas some other

cultures don't have the same considerations on conflicts and believe that it is profitable for both parts. Another aspect of the conflict is the way to tackle it. Some cultures are accustomed to settle a conflict by a written exchange, contrary to the western face-to-face confrontation which can be embarrassing for them. How to complete task also differs from a culture to another because they will consider the same approach to complete it and also the way to work in teams are not the same.

The process to make a decision in the working process is also submitted to variation depending on the cultural background. In some countries there is only one decision maker for the entire working process whereas in others there must be a common agreement on what to do. Expressing feelings can also be an issue because it may be considered rude in some cultures to frankly expose emotions regarding a problem. Finally, the knowing process is also a relevant matter in a cross-cultural context. In some countries, you know because this is the way you learned it in school but in others it is more based on your experience or on witnessing events.

Though understanding the differences that all of these fundamental patterns bear, it is not the principal and unique approach to a cross-cultural context. Hofstede<sup>4</sup> (1996) considers five fundamental approaches to national culture: hierarchy, ambiguity, individualism, achievement and long-term orientation. Hierarchy is seen differently through the cultural point of view. In some culture there is an appointed leader who will make all the decision but in others there is no leader and all the decision process is driven by consensus.

Ambiguity is encouraged in some cultures - taking risks and own initiatives - but in others workers prefer tested ways of workings instead of -to their opinion - useless risk taking. Depending on the culture you address, individualism cannot be seen as a favorable aspect of work where collectivism is the main belief. Regarding achievement Hofstede separates masculine and feminine dimensions for the values that have been associated to them is mainly a consequence of their gender. A masculine culture will be seen as valuing success, achievement and money and a feminine one will, on the other hand, value life quality, sharing, and harmony.

As for long-term orientation, some countries and cultures try to foresee the long-term benefits of their work opposed to others which will encourage immediate gain. According to these several analysis, the main problems that may occur in a cross-cultural context are the direct consequences of the differences of the cultures represented. If we take back the example of Donald Gleason when he first arrived in the Mexican plant, he was not considered as a manager but as a usual worker because he was wearing casual clothes and not a suit and a tie like all Mexican managers do.

When he was confronted to a problem in the production system he tried to address the issue directly with the workers and not with the plant director. It ultimately led to a lack of understanding of his work from the workers and, as I stated before, to a 500. 000 \$ loss. Bond through the theory of Edward Hall<sup>5</sup> (1959) presents us the difference between a Honk Kong Chinese organization considered as polychromic and a Western one considered as monochromic.

On one hand the Honk Kong Chinese worker will focus on the involvement and the completion of a transaction rather than strict application of a schedule which can cause the frustration of Western managers because it leads to arriving late or even forgetting meetings and reorganizing daily ones working priorities. As pointed out in the introduction of the essay, its goal is not to offer solutions to these issues but principally to identify them. The previous theories main arguments can be sum up in one idea: difference.

The main problem raised by a cross-cultural context is the very cultural difference that all, the workers and the managers, want to benefit from. Because culture is based on beliefs, religion, nationality, beliefs, values, views and behaviors the problems that may rise from the cultural difference lie in each and every one of these aspects. All persons having a different cultural background and often an ignorance of other's, it can ultimately end by a confrontation on the working place but as we realized in our essay, even these confrontations must be considered from a cultural point of view.