

# Managing multicultural teams

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## **Key Issues**

Cultural differences affect teamwork and the damage often precedes intervention. Proper knowledge is needed in managing these differences, or more damage occurs. Communication plays an integral part in cultural differences. Direct communication can be perceived by some as clear communication, but for others it may be embarrassing. Indirect communication, in turn, can result in miscommunication.

Accent and fluency differences can be barriers to effective teamwork, unless team members choose and put effort in learning and using the preferred language of the team. Authority and hierarchy are also regarded highly by some cultures, while others do not. This may become offensive for cultures who regard the chain of command as important. Decision-making style is another factor. Some cultures decide fast, while others drag on. There are four strategies that can be used for managing multicultural differences in the workplace: adaptation, structural intervention, managerial intervention, and exit. Adaptation works when team members are open about the differences and chooses to work around them. Structural intervention is used when team members are resistant to acknowledging and working around their differences.

In many cases, this may require sub-grouping. Managerial intervention may be necessary when the managers are needed to be involved so that one culture's management may resolve the conflict with the other culture's management, avoiding embarrassment and conflict on not following hierarchies. Exit is a last option, and it may be voluntary or management-

requested. It does not help with the difference, but it allows the team to move again with new people. There is no one fool-proof strategy; its use is dependent on the case in hand. When the management discusses multicultural differences with team members beforehand, the team will be able to pull through the job with less problems. When team members are open about the differences and works with them, involvement of the higher management becomes unnecessary and the project becomes easier.

## **Analysis**

Multicultural teams are essential for many companies, especially those engaging in international deals, but it is an investment that needs careful understanding and management. There are many issues that may arise within teams composed of people from differing beliefs and practices, and communication is only one of these issues. Perceptions on different corporate items such as hierarchy and decision making equally affects the performance of a team and its members. Oftentimes, managers will have to take a stand and face the problem.

There are four strategies in which the issue of multicultural team conflicts may be resolved, and the most appropriate strategy depends on the difference that needs to be addressed. Also, the strategy to be used is dependent on how well the team members are willing to participate in solving the problem within the team.

In hindsight, problems can be pre-empted by managers when the issue of multicultural difference is discussed beforehand, before the team starts working together. This way, the members will have a foreknowledge of why

their members from the other culture is working the way they do. Members should also be cooperative, willing to cope with and understand the differences. This can be solicited by the manager, but it should also be automatic among the team. When culturally-different team members are cooperative and understanding, it is possible for them to co-exist and work their way to the accomplishment of their given tasks.