

COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT ACROSS CULTURALLY DIVERSE TEAMS

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Abstract

The unprecedented trend of person mobility and active interactions across cultures and borders has triggered an increasing number of challenges and, with them, the imperative need to find valid solutions. In organizations and institutions across the globe, – regardless of whether they operate in areas such as business, hospitality, education or entertainment – teams are a much-needed instrument for innovation, problem solving or increased productivity. This paper sets to investigate the relevance of communication in culturally diverse teams, the main factor that ensures the cohesion and efficiency of such teams, namely the acquisition of intercultural competence, and the application of a cultural model to the complex structure of international groups. By the same token, we identified a series of benefits and drawbacks of cross-cultural teams and presented some suggestions to overcome them.

Keywords: intercultural competence, multicultural teams, cultural diversity, intercultural communication

JEL Classification: Z13

1. Introduction

One of the main features of the twenty first century, which will definitely continue to develop despite the forced hiatus caused by the global SARS-COV2 pandemic, is the great mobility of people and information across borders and cultures. The ability to travel the world and witness the spectacular variety of the human and natural landscape has reached a level unparalleled in previous centuries. The world became physically smaller as it grew bigger and richer in terms of forms of interaction, experience exchanges and willingness to acknowledge the presence of the Other.

The dynamics of cross-cultural interactions is obviously not limited to leisurely travelling; with the increasing interest in what cultural and economic differences have to offer, the scope of intercultural relations has gone beyond the travel industry to encompass areas such as business, education, health care, migration, to mention but a few. Consequently, the parties involved in such interactions find themselves faced with the challenge of having to cope with work in multicultural teams, which means that they need to develop a set of skills – social, linguistic, professional – that could assist them in becoming valuable members of the team and contribute to its performance.

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In this paper we take a closer look at the composition and challenges faced by culturally diverse teams. The discussion relies on an outlook of intercultural communication as the essential tool in cross-cultural interactions. Hofstede's pyramid of mental programming is used as a frame of reference for the composition of a team, with the complexities its components entail. The approach to multicultural teams is centered on the acquisition of intercultural competence deemed quintessential in the build-up of a cohesive and productive team. The second half of the paper investigates some advantages and drawbacks of multicultural teams, in an attempt to identify the benefits, but also the challenges prompted by the existence of a multicultural work environment.

2. Remarks on intercultural communication

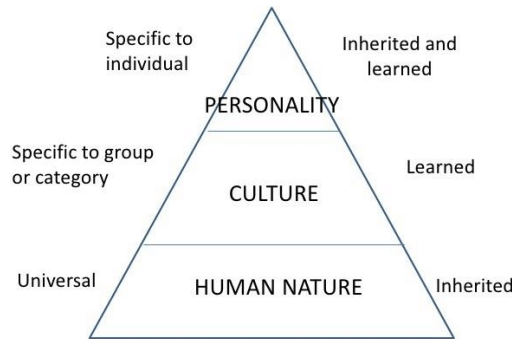
In the broad context of ever-growing contacts among people belonging to various cultural spaces, issues connected with intercultural communication have become increasingly important not only for individuals, but also for organizations and institutions. Multinational corporations have become well-aware of the fact that the cohesion and efficiency of their multicultural teams, but also their culture-dependent approach to work ethics, perception of authority or gender roles influence directly professional outcomes and, ultimately, company productivity. Similarly, in academic settings undergraduates are assigned to various groups or teams which are, at least to some extent, of international fabric. The success of the group/team work depends on how the members understand to work as such, and their behavior, apart from individual, personal manifestations, is largely conditioned by their cultural heritage.

Success in intercultural communication is almost impossible to achieve unless there is awareness of the potential and very likely manifestation of differences between the interacting parties. This is the reason why we believe that one of the most inspired approaches to this form of communication belongs to Samovar et al. According to these researchers, it "involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems differ enough to influence the communication event" (2013: 8). In other words, communication events are inevitably marked by cultural divergence; this does not necessarily mean that the influence will be negative. Very often, interlocutors discover that their dissimilarities are actually a great opportunity to learn about some other culture and, in turn, make their own cultural heritage known to others. But such culturally distinct encounters may also represent the ground for clashes, for confrontations that could have detrimental effects for all the parties involved, in the absence of tolerance and openness to accept the existence of equally valid and valuable alternatives to one's own view of reality. As Lin (2020) argues, cultural diversity is not merely limited to the coexistence and simultaneous manifestation of distinct languages, values, customs, religious, political or sexual orientation, but also includes people's reactions to this variety and how they choose to fit it (or not) in their own cultural and mental framework.

Intercultural communication is actually a tool for the inclusive consideration of culture in interaction. One of the most famous approaches to culture in all its diversity and richness is G. Hofstede's definition of culture as human software. This suggests that every manifestation of culture-dependent behavior is a reflection of values, conventions, symbol systems acquired by an individual through interactions in the culture to which

s/he belongs. In cross-cultural groups, every member comes with a different form of cultural programming, as, according to the Dutch researcher (2012), mental programs are as different among themselves as are the social media in which they were acquired.

Figure 1. Hofstede's hierarchic levels of mental programming



When transplanted to a multicultural work environment, Hofstede's pyramid illustrated in Figure 1 hints at the complex composition of such a working context. All team members share in common the basic level of the pyramid, which is universal, inherited and which developed within the same parameters across the human species. It mirrors the human ability to feel a wide range of emotions such as fear, joy, anger or the need to interact with peers; but how we process and what we do with these inherited abilities is the result of culture.

Therefore, the second layer of the pyramid starts to differentiate team members significantly, as the "culture" stratum is the place of manifestation of who individuals are as members of their respective cultures; they introduce themselves as the products of Hofstede's mental programming. Difficulties and challenges in communication start at this level, with the potential clash between components of so many diverse "programs". The hierarchy is completed with personality, which is how each individual puts into practice his/her cultural programming. The personality layer adds to the complexity of the interaction context, which is already complicated by the cultural aspect. An individual's personality is both genetically inherited and acquired; this acquisition is a blend of cultural influence and personal experience.

3. Multicultural teams

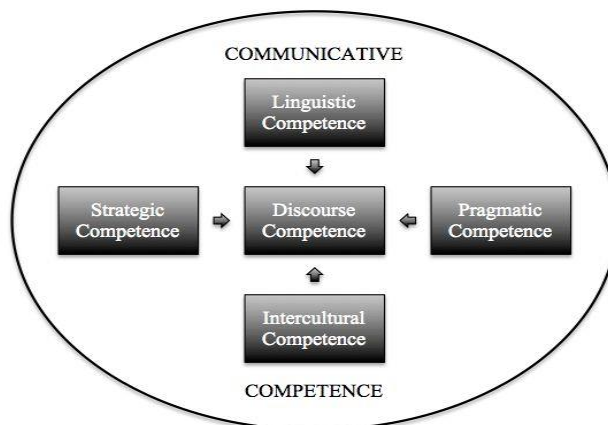
In multicultural environments, an essential element is the existence of teams whose members have distinct cultural backgrounds and who have to collaborate in order to achieve a common goal. Whereas collaboration is one of the most powerful and efficient tools of human interaction (it actually ensured the survival and development of our species through combined and complex processes of decision making and obstacle fighting), the situation gains in complexity when the persons who have to collaborate do not share the same outlook on aspects that are paramount for the efficiency of their joint efforts. Cohen & Bailey (1997) provide the following definition of an international team:

it is a “collection of individuals with different cultural backgrounds, who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems, and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries and beyond” (241). The key concepts in this view of international teams are distinct cultural backgrounds and shared responsibility for outcomes, a mix that may generate considerable mishaps and miscommunication, but which, with the appropriate attitude, contains a huge potential for creative solution finding and problem solving approaches.

Going into further details, Sogancilar and Ors (2018) mention several types of multicultural groups classified according to categories of members. Thus, “a team may consist of members from diverse cultural backgrounds including expats or ethnic minorities working together in the same country. Secondly, it may possess members who are dispersed across many countries but occasionally meet up in person. And thirdly, virtual teams that possess members from various countries, working together via electronic devices and medias and not meeting in person” (261). As can be inferred from this multicultural group taxonomy, potential issues stemming from culturally distinct views of the world can be completed by a series of other problems such as dependence on technology, different time zones, lack of direct and, as such, insufficient use of nonverbal language (in the case of virtual teams) which has a great influence on the communication of a group.

In order for teams with a rich and diverse cultural structure to reach a common ground of understanding that would benefit the entire group, it is paramount for the members to acquire a certain level of communication competence. Regardless of whether we speak of multinational work teams, study groups or entertainment associations, the persons interacting in the same context and striving to achieve a shared performance goal need to be in possession of a set of skills that can be obtained through training, independent documentation or repeated exposure to certain communication situations. The process of adaptation to new cultural settings entails a change or an enrichment of paradigms and cultural references (Georgiu, 2010: 127) that assists the individual’s adjustment to a potentially challenging situation.

Figure 2. Components of communicative competence



As can be noted in the figure above, the core of this set of skills is represented by discourse competence – the use of language in distinct social contexts and to various ends – which is built through the layering of four other types of capabilities. Linguistic competence is probably the one with the easiest acquisition, as in this type of teams, English is the lingua franca in all discussions and debates. Lack of or insufficient English language mastery can be a serious roadblock in communication and even a factor which may decide the inclusion of a person in a given team. The level of linguistic competence dictates the degree to which differences in accents, pronunciation, word choice, jargon, grammar rules are handled. In close connection with this type of knowledge is the acquisition of pragmatic competence, which reflects the connection between language and socialization. It refers to the use of already acquired language in social contexts, the purpose of the communicative act, degrees of formality/informality, covered topics – overall language adaptation to the communication situation.

The development of strategic competence is the practical implementation of techniques and strategies, both verbal and nonverbal, that are used in order to bridge communication gaps or find solutions to difficult situations triggered by a lack of sufficient competence. The acquisition of this type of competence is essential because it boosts individuals' confidence and helps them control their communicative performance (Meenakshi, 2015). Finally, the efficient operation of any intercultural group is highly dependent on the members' awareness of the relevance of intercultural competence. From among all the above-mentioned abilities, this is probably the most complex one, as it is built in time, not through training alone, but more likely through a constant exposure to a given cultural frame and an active process of self-reflection. It comprises the development of a multitude of skills that inform appropriate behavior in multicultural contexts. In order to be truly useful in interactions, thorough intercultural competence requires much introspection, as it involves connecting distinct cultural perspectives with one's own inherited baggage and the willingness to embrace these dissimilarities as opportunities for learning and growth.

4. Advantages of culturally diverse teams

Multicultural environments, regardless of whether they are the reality in business ventures, hospitality industry companies or education institutions, represent a blend of ethnic and cultural views. Despite the inherent difficulties triggered by the encounter of such diverse perceptions and perspectives, cross-cultural teams or groups present numerous benefits for the respective entities. Perhaps one of the greatest advantages is the plus of creativity brought about by the pooling of ideas emanating from individuals who contribute to the team not only with their own experience, but also by sharing efficient work principles and strategies from their respective cultures, which could be exported to the newly shared environment. The higher the number of members pertaining to a vast area of cultural experience, the more valuable ideas to harness within the team.

In close connection with the creativity aspect is the increase in productivity, because multiple and diverse cultural backgrounds stimulate innovation and, as such, productivity. In an international team, each member pitches in with his/her own experience, attitude and mindset which translate into more ideas that in a company could

mean a wider range of products/services offered and in a student group, for instance, could represent more complex and innovative solutions to a project. Likewise, with culturally diverse teams there is also an increased openness to meet the requirements of an international customer base.

Another economic perk is that a multicultural work environment which is known to offer respect for and appreciation of diversity will most likely attract talented employees of various cultural origin, willing to bring their input to an organization that would value their specific contribution. If the organizational culture is inclusive of intercultural cooperation, this will foster a deeper sense of stability and acceptance among team members, who feel thus encouraged to demonstrate their loyalty to the company.

There is another huge advantage of being part of a multicultural environment, although it is rather to the benefit of individuals than to the team as part of an organization. Constant, sometimes daily contact with a culturally different Other is a great opportunity to learn and have unmediated access to a distinct mindset and manner of doing things. If there is openness and willingness to learn, every situation that represents a potential challenge is actually another chance to improve one's communication and cultural skills and to diminish one's natural propensity for stereotyping and prejudice. In the process, gains translate into a heightened sense of tolerance, flexibility and readiness to collaborate. Bonding with international peers is also an excellent means to build an international network that may prove beneficial for professional advancement.

5. Obstacles to cohesive multicultural groups

The situations, constructs and attitudes that represent potential barriers in any context of intercultural communication can all turn into stumbling blocks for the efficiency of a multicultural team. They are, however, completed by others that are specific to work environments such as ethics, different perspectives on authority and hierarchy, distinct work cultures, different approaches to problem solving etc.

The obstacle that is apparent even at a superficial look has to do with *communication*, both verbal and nonverbal. While it is generally agreed that English is the universal language used in multicultural group interaction, not all members of the group have the same level of linguistic proficiency in all language levels – grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic use, fluency, comprehension etc. While these can be to some extent solved with the help of translations and interpreting (which are also prone to miscommunication because of errors and subjective interpretation), the nonverbal component of communication requires heightened attention paid to the context, and serious documentation. Occulesics, haptics and proxemics are categories of the nonverbal that carry the highest risks for triggering communication problems. For instance, in a multicultural work group, if some members avoid or use insufficient eye contact this is not a sign of disrespect, lack of interest or of competence, it is just a manifestation of an internalized cultural rule which dictates that intense eye contact is best avoided as it conveys negative meanings. Similarly, touching and personal and professional distance are regulated by cultural conventions, the breach of which caused by ignorance can seriously damage relations among team members, with a negative impact on group cohesion.

When members of a group interact, they are more than individualities – they are also representatives of cultural patterns inherited and acquired following exposure to a set of the values owned by a given community as the basis for its existence in and view of the world. Differences in *cultural patterns* comprise aspects that are particularly relevant for the work environment such as relationship to authority, time perception or ethical behavior. Whenever people act upon their inherited cultural values, they have a sense of belonging and stability, which is essential especially in an unfamiliar environment or when faced with so many other cultural systems, as is the case with a multicultural group. “When enacted, a culture’s value system establishes the expected, normative modes of behavior for members of that culture and institutes the criteria used to judge people’s conduct. Unfortunately, those criteria are often applied to members of other cultures who have different values, and this frequently results in misunderstanding and even conflict” (Samovar et al., 2003: 175). Divergent cultural patterns turn into a problem when they are used inflexibly and strictly as a measure for cultural alterity.

Time orientation can be particularly troublesome for the performance of a group which normally has to respect deadlines and which relies on the input of every member for the achievement of the final common goal. According to the perception of time, researcher Edward T. Hall divided cultures into polychronic and monochronic, according to how they handle tasks and the priority they give to relationship formation. Thus, it would be a genuine challenge for an M-culture person (a Finn or a German, for instance) to work on the same project with several colleagues belonging to a P-culture (e.g. a Nigerian or a Columbian). M-culture persons focus on one task at a time, value individual achievements (which in itself can be an issue in a team) and have a strict compliance with deadlines and scheduled events, as opposed to P-culture representatives who have a more holistic approach, have a greater availability for work group, as they express a high appreciation for personal relations, and feel comfortable juggling with several tasks simultaneously. Consequently, task-oriented groups with a multicultural composition may face serious challenges if the members are not willing to compromise and learn how to adjust their perspective in such a manner that would benefit the entire team.

The same researcher designed another cultural model based on the appraisal by various cultures of the communication context. Thus, he classified cultures as high- and low-context, respectively, with the observation that no culture is absolutely at one extreme or the other. Members of high-context cultures such as Mexicans, Africans or Asians consider that the context can contain many essential clues for an efficient communication event. As such, they rely heavily on body language as a complement to language, have a flexible view of time (are usually polychronic), manifest a strong sense of community and favor processes instead of outcomes.

Conversely, low-context cultures such as the Scandinavian ones, the French or North American cultures, place less emphasis on the nonverbal and prefer explicit and overt messages, have a very strict commitment to deadlines (which makes them monochronic), a flexible approach to relationships and, hence, to group structure and are particularly centered on the end results of work rather than on the processes performed to obtain them. A multicultural work environment is most likely the place of high- and low-context cultural manifestations, whose differences have a bearing on the tackling of a task

and on the priority that various team members give to the accomplishment of an objective: some will focus on the end result, while others will give prominence to the actions needed in order to reach there. It is the responsibility of the (formal or informal) team leader, but also the members' individual willingness to accept such gaps and strive to bridge them through flexibility and mutual tolerance.

In groups that host divergent opinions and modes of behavior stemming from inherited cultural frameworks, stereotyping and ethnocentrism are two major barriers to productive communication. *Stereotyping* is the result of perception organization into classes and categories for the aim of making sense of events or encounters that do not fit our frame of reference. The main problem with this form of categorization is the overgeneralization that tends to apply a one-size-fit-all label to members belonging to the same linguistic, geographic or cultural community. Patel et al. (2011) claim that a stereotype is a "shortcut in collecting, processing and interpreting information about a cultural group by perceiving people according to their social categories rather than their individual characteristics. The shortcut is used as a handy tool to help us reduce our memory load by making inference and prediction about the group without having to perceive it first-hand" (30). Although the mechanism of stereotyping may be useful in helping people cope with new situations to which they apply a familiar frame, it becomes a problem especially in teams with a weak sense of connection and solidarity because it ignores the uniqueness and specificity of each individual and considers him/her solely as the embodiment of a set of traits collectively applied to the community where s/he belongs. While some stereotypes are positive – Germans are hardworking, Italians are generous, Americans are optimistic –, negative ones can have a detrimental effect on group productivity. The situation acquires even darker overtones when there are culturally fueled antipathies such as the famous ones between the French and the British or the Polish and the Germans, who have to work together and do it efficiently.

While there may be some positive aspects of stereotyping under certain circumstances, *ethnocentrism* is almost entirely a negative perception of cultural diversity. It starts from the assumption that one's culture is superior to others in all respects and encompasses judgments connected to what is good, moral or ethical, but from a narrow perspective; it is the idea according to which "other cultures should be measured by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards. We are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture or social position" (Nanda and Warms, 2011: 10). Ethnocentric views affect all the parties involved, including persons belonging to the host culture, who may start judging outsiders. The solution to the elimination or at least curbing of ethnocentric manifestations in a group is, as in the case of stereotyping, the acknowledgment of its existence and of its impact on others and the development of abilities to treat everyone fairly, within the framework of their own cultural forms of representation.

6. Conclusions

It would be impossible nowadays to imagine almost any area of activity that does not contain and benefit from an interaction among actors with diverse cultural backgrounds. In actual fact, to a significant extent, success in many fields is highly dependent on the existence of a plurality of perspectives that offer unique, but equally valid stands on reality.

Team or group work is among the most productive mechanisms that organizations tap into as a means to find and establish their place in a world that is in a continuous state of transformation, remodeling traditional paradigms into newer structures.

This paper approached the topic of multicultural teams from the communication standpoint. Consideration was given to the broader context of cross-cultural communication, with emphasis on the acquisition of intercultural competence skills, which are the main condition for success in cross-cultural encounters. A number of benefits were identified in connection with a multicultural work environment, followed by a series of potential obstacles to efficient communication in culturally-diverse teams. The detected problems were accompanied by suggested remedying solutions, some of which involve a constant and conscious effort of adjustment and collaboration. As the key concepts of our analysis were culture, cross-cultural representation, interaction and communication in culturally diverse environments, the solutions to almost all the identified obstacles involve respect, tolerance and openness to embrace otherness as the main ingredients for a superior performance in complex collective contexts.

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