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## Best Ways to Manage a Multicultural Team | Aparna Sharma | Senior HR Professional & Certified Corporate Director | Editor's Collection

One of the primary talents international leaders need today is the ability to manage and leverage cultural differences. Today's manager has to work in both international and cross-cultural environments.

Perhaps your company has worked hard to cultivate diversity. Or, maybe you're part of a multicultural organization that prioritizes the contributions of a diverse workforce. Now, you're managing a culturally diverse team and you want to maximize the contributions each member can offer.

While managing culturally diverse teams requires the same skills that are needed to manage teams in general, there are some particular areas that may need attention.

### AVOID STEREOTYPES



There's a fine line between being aware of culture differences and stereotyping. While it's a good idea to be aware of certain business norms, being open-minded about your team members and how they prefer to work and communicate will help you manage them better and avoid misconceptions.

## **CALIBRATE**

As you do get to know those team members, it is important to note varied communication styles. Some regions may have a reputation for being direct while others may favor more differential ways of communicating. As you get to know your team members, be ready to adapt your own communication so that different styles don't get in the way of doing good work and you can begin to address differences to overcome them.

## **ALLOW PREP TIME**

When people are uncomfortable in a situation or if they're not a native speaker of the language in which a meeting is being conducted, they may be reticent in participating in meetings. Ambushing them or expecting on-the-spot answers and creativity can make things worse. It's best to let team members know what you expect from them and give them time to prepare or respond.

## **MONITOR TEAM DYNAMICS**

As a team leader, you need to be aware of the roles people play on your team. In multicultural teams, communication challenges can come up and it's important to make sure they don't become problematic. If you see signs of a project stalling or any kind of interpersonal conflict, it's time to step in. Having empathy for each of the team members is important to avoid escalating the conflict.

## **BREAK DOWN BARRIERS**

Lego building blocks are used in various team building sessions. The tactile nature of building something together often helps break down issues that are affecting teams. In one case, a seminar was held with two different teams going through a merger who were experiencing hostility towards one another. By using the bricks to create a three-dimensional business landscape, the teams uncovered attitudes, language and communication styles that were problematic, which led to better awareness and understanding.

Having team members spend time together outside of the work environment can help foster understanding. It's also important to periodically check in with team members one-on-one and let them know they can share their challenges candidly with you.

Managers are required to deal with challenges, friction, and misunderstandings stemming from intercultural communication differences. Therefore, successful management in a modern

environment demands cross-cultural competency. In order to get the best out of any multicultural team, being mindful and modifying your leadership style accordingly is very critical to success.

Here are some tips to keep in mind –

- **Face Time**

Try and communicate with your team face-to-face as much as you can. Nothing replaces face-to-face communication, as it allows you to read body language, assess levels of understanding, and build relationships.

- **Crystal Clear**

Be clear about your own cultural profile. Only when you are clear and how it influences your work, your communication style, feelings and actions, can you direct your team. This authentic approach to your own cultural identity can help improve your and your team's performance.

- **Less Is More**

Cultural differences can create obstacles to effective teamwork, especially with multicultural teams. The challenge in dealing with these teams successfully is to identify the original cultural causes of conflict. Intervene only when necessary, get the team back on track, enable and empower them to deal with future challenges on their own.

- **A Stitch in Time Saves Nine**

Achieving team cohesion and shared vision means encouraging dialogue and communication. This requires time, and it is highly recommended that you invest this time into finding out more about your team members and how their national culture influences their behavior and values.

- **Build Trust**

Trust builds over time and with every action. Make sure you are accountable for your actions and upfront in your dealings with others. Do you do what you say you will do? Non-delivery will destroy trust and credibility every time.

- **Walk a Mile in Their Shoes**

As an effective leader you need to be able to truly understand your team's perspective. So regularly 'check in' with your team members, listen to see what's happening with them, their assignment and their development.

- **State the Rules of the Game**

Rules and roles have to be set and understood by everyone. The rules of the game have to be negotiated and people need to be comfortable with their own roles. The team leader must act as a secure base so when a member is struggling they know who to turn to.

- **Identity Crisis**

Developing a team identity is central. To ensure effective team management, the manager must ensure clarity and shared expectations. Make sure that they understand what's going on, so that the team's objectives aren't forgotten or shelved.

- **From Global to Local**

Amass, absorb, and use local knowledge to your team's advantage. One size does not fit all, so get to know the people you operate with. Ask yourself: "What drives these people and what are their individual objectives?"

- **Be the Cultural Shock Absorber**

It is advisable to invest in a tailor-made coaching program with an experienced cross-cultural coach. Get deeper insight into the respective cultures at hand to ensure that there is clear understanding of the individual and collective values, as this is central when working with a multicultural team.

In summary, communicate with each employee by giving both positive and constructive feedback on a regular basis. Do not give people who are different from you an easier or harder time. Treat each of your employees fairly and equally. Give each person opportunities to shine and grow.



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