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MULTICULTURAL TEAM CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Introduction

In the period of globalization, the question of effective communication between people of different nations is essential to ensure that all parties emerge with the same understanding. Without the right approach, cultural differences can greatly affect governments, businesses, organisations and individuals. Intercultural communication is no longer an option, but a necessity; therefore there is a need to integrate intercultural communication in the university programmes and to give students the opportunity to develop their cross-cultural communication and international business communication skills through both theory and practice and to confront them to the reality of a professional environment.

Professionals in multicultural corporations usually work in a team context and have to be familiar with terms such as team player, team skills, team building, and team performance that relate to the ability to cooperate with people in teams aiming at accomplishing professional projects, therefore effective communication within multicultural teams is a skill which is increasingly sought after by European companies and institutions (Heinz, 2009; pp. 312-313).

The first part of the article deals with the potential problems occurring during the team building on the basis of Tuckman´s model. Further it concentrates especially on problem solving in teams, including multicultural ones and its specifics, continues with the concept of productive conflict, and lists various ways of handling it. Next it presents advantages and disadvantages of working in multicultural teams, management of such teams, including conflict managementusing an example of the European project The Intensive Programme **Effective Communication in Multicultural Teams** approved in 2011 and finalized in 2014.

1. Groups, teams and team roles

A group can be defined as three or more individuals who are working on a common goal, the result of which is reflected in relationships and interactions. Teams also have common goals and purposes, but the nature of the relationships and interactions is different – members of a team share leadership responsibility for creating a team identity, achieving mutually defined goals, while implementing innovative thinking.

The definition emphasizes the key differences between groups and teams related to four areas. The first one involves leadership responsibilities in terms of defining goals, making decisions, and implementing ideas that should be shared by all the members of the team. The second key difference is related to the identity of the term, the third one to the defining of the goals, and the last one to striving for innovation. This means that a team strives for a magnified impact incremental to what its members could achieve in their individual roles (Katzenbach, Smith, 1993, p. 88).

In every team members can play different types of roles – task roles and relationship roles. Both of them help the team to achieve goals or maintain positive relationships among members. Task roles involve for example *initiator* who suggest ideas and introduces new approaches, *information seeker* asking for clarification and additional information, *coordinator* who shows relationships among various ideas and suggestions, and *evaluator*, a person restating ideas and describing relationships.

Relationship roles are related to *supporter,* encouraging others, praising and suggesting solidarity, *harmonizer,* mediating differences and suggesting areas of agreement, and *gatekeeper,* who prevents dominance by others and facilitates interactions.

However, there also exist dysfunctional roles, known as self-centred roles, that should be limited within the team as they interfere with the team's ability to complete tasks. These roles involve for example *blocker*, who has negative responses to most ideas, *attacker* who is aggressive to achieve personal status, and *clown* refusing to take ideas seriously and disrupting with jokes (Quintanilla, Wahl, 2011, pp. 115-116, 118-128).

2. Cross-cultural management in multicultural teams

As the EU supports numerous projects and multicultural project teams are often separated geographically, having different organizational and regional cultures, they have their own communication challenges. Even if the data transfer among multicultural teams is ensured due to information systems and telecommunications, many issues are

not solved, for example the loss of face-to-face communication, the loss of non-verbal signals that may lead to misunderstanding and difficulties in relationship building. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact how team members with different cultural background manage to communicate successfully and develop team dynamics. In global and intercultural world people must understand how people act in international, national, and local businesses. Cultures are different in organizations and if a company wants to do business internationally, it needs to have knowledge related to diverse management process. However, for example corporate Europe shares some common rules, like understanding the impact of risks, uncertainties, and conflicts, striving for steady growth, open boundaries, and cosmopolitan society.

It has been proved that diverse teams perform better than homogenous teams as it includes benefits like variety of perspectives, skills and personal attributes, and effective interaction among project team members enables the formation of a strong team culture. However, multicultural team members have different perception of the environment, which can have a negative impact on social cohesion of the team (Ochieng, Price, 2010,. pp. 449-460).

Efficient management should be prepared to focus on study of cultures that concern especially the following areas (Suder, 2011, pp. 179-192):

- systems of shared areas,
- the value of diversity,
- beliefs, values, and norms,
- patterns of symbols.

Managers also must be aware of the fact that it is necessary to cope with various verbal and non-verbal languages, and find a common language for intercultural communication. In Europe, the general recommendation for managers is to be able to speak and write three languages, that is English, German, and French or Spanish. Apart from verbal information, business can also be influenced by the interpretation of business context which includes interpretation of space, time, body and facial expressions, social patterns and behaviours, and the ways the conflicts are resolved and agreements are made.

The value of diversity is important because it is a starting point for exchanging knowledge, expertise and experience related to different contexts, but at the same time it can have a direct impact on negotiations, especially when the partners do not share the same national or regional culture. Therefore, managers of multicultural teams need

an expertise of cross-cultural management methodology acquired by training or experience. The advantage of training is that trainees show a fast learning curve, but very often it leads to stereotyping of some business situations. Experience cannot be replaced by anything, but require much more time. It seems to be the best solution to join both of the mentioned methodologies shown in the following added values:

- the level and frequency of cross-cultural clashes is reduced,
- the adaptation period to foreign culture is shortened,
- the efficiency of managers in a foreign environment is immediate.

The crucial issue in the management of multicultural teams is creation of trust and confidence where Hofstede´s culture dimensions can be some kind of help. His books complemented by the works of Hall, Trompenaars and the GLOBE study can provide an early expertise about a host country´s cultural dimension, compare it to someone's own culture, and in this way reduce its negative impact on cross-cultural management.

According to G. Hofstede (2001, pp. 79-372) culture values are invisible behaviours. The possible culture values are for example family, job, money, religion, seniority, individualism, hierarchy, and others. The values that are the most important in one culture, can be not very significant in another one. Seniority means showing respect to people who stand higher in social hierarchy, and these are usually people belonging to the older generation. This value is typical for Far Eastern countries, but after examining e.g. American culture, you will come to the conclusion that seniority does not play a very significant role in this society.

Comparative and so called intercultural studies are becoming increasingly more important in the global business environment and their results can be used in practical life. The valuable study of cultures by G. Hofstede and E.T. Hall (1988, pp. 4-21) have led to the culture dimensions, such as individualism versus collectivism, monochrony versus polychrony, masculinity versus femininity, high power distance versus low power distance, high uncertainty avoidance versus low uncertainty avoidance, high context versus low context, high contact versus low contact, etc.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner classified cultures along a mix of behavioural and value patterns. Their research focuses on the cultural dimensions of business executives.

In their book *Riding the Waves of Culture* Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner identify seven value orientations. Some of these value orientations can be regarded as nearly

identical to Hofstede's dimensions. Some of the value dimensions identified were: universalism versus particularism, communitarianism versus individualism, neutral versus emotional, defuse versus specific, future orientation, etc.

Later Hofstede's works with Bond introduce another dimension connected with the rapid economic development of some Asian countries. This dimension refers to the selective promotion of particular set of ethics found in Confucian teaching, e.g. thrift, perseverance, a sense of shame, tradition, and following a hierarchy.

However, the most often listed dimensions involve

- power distance
- individualism x collectivism
- masculinity x femininity
- uncertainty avoidance
- time orientation.

Power distance dimension deals with the way how members of the society accept power distributed unequally. In high power distance cultures, such as Turkey and Portugal each person has a position in the society, while in Scandinavia and The Netherlands, in low power distance cultures, hierarchy is not important and people try to focus on collaboration of different power levels. This dimensions also influences decision making, negotiating, and human resources policies.

In individualist cultures concentrate on their individual goals, while in collectivist cultures the main focus is on common goals and belonging to the group, emphasizing harmony and some degree of conformity. Scandinavian countries are closer to individualist cultures and South European countries are very close to collectivist cultures. There are objections that a public sector is naturally driven by collective goals, so it is necessary to be aware that culture depends not only on nationality, but also on industries, types of sectors, professions, etc.

High masculinity cultures are characterized by their dominant values – achievement and success. Low masculinity values cultures focus on care for others and quality of life, while performance and achievement are not so important. A tendency towards masculinity can be found in Italy, for example, and the examples of feminine cultures are Scandinavian cultures and The Netherlands. However, in profit focus companies even in feminine cultures the atmosphere may be competitive and some companies employees may insist on introducing social and humanitarian issues.

Uncertainty avoidance tells how much people feel uncertain and try to avoid situations where ambiguity and uncertainty occur. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures

people value rules and security, while in low uncertainty avoidance cultures people tend to be more innovative and like risk taking. Countries belonging to Eastern and Southern Europe are closer to high uncertainty avoidance cultures and cultures in Scandinavia and GB tend to be low uncertainty avoidance.

Division to monochronic and polychronic cultures indicates how managers develop strategies related to negotiating contracts, what people´s attitudes to time are, and how they react to deadlines. Southern European countries tend to belong to polychromic cultures, while Scandinavian countries for example, are monochronic.

The dimensions mentioned in pioneering works are sometimes criticized and the debate related to them continues. Lately, many studies have been carried out, the GLOBE being among them, focusing on how cultural differences affect management preferences. The survey conducted in 2004 was based on collecting quantitative data from questionnaires distributed to 17 000 managers in 850 organizations from 62 different countries. The GLOBE project confirms the findings of previous research, but at the same time identifies clusters of countries that share similar culture dimensions taking into consideration economic, political and historical factors, for example the country cluster of Eastern Europe, Latin Europe, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic Europe, Latin America, Arab countries, Confucian Asia, etc (Branine, 2011, pp. 1-17).

The listed studies tried to explain cultural differences between different societies. They identified cultural dimensions and developed models for the analysis of culturally oriented work and social behaviour. They significantly contributed to the classification of cultural differences related to value orientation and dimensions for comparative and analytical purposes.

3. Tuckman´s model related to multicultural team dynamics

One of the ways helping the students and teachers to overcome difficulties during working in multicultural teams was Tuckman´s Team Development Model involving a questionnaire to be used during working in multicultural teams to find out on which stage of cooperation in the team they are. The questionnaire was distributed to the students after being divided into multicultural teams and after their trying to agree on the common topic and goal of their project. The model suggests that all the teams can move through a number of phases, but some groups can get stuck in one of non productive phases. The model can help to understand why some groups perform better than others.

It also provides guidance related to group leaders, group members and outside consultants what to do to move a group from an unproductive phase into a productive one. The psychologist Bruce Tuckman defined five stages taking place in teams. In his opinion teams initially go through a **forming** stage in which members are positive and polite. Some members are anxious and excited, especially when they had not worked in a team before. The leader plays a dominant role at this stage and other members' roles and responsibilities are less clear.

As Tuckman says (1965, pp. 384–99), This stage is usually fairly short, and may only last for the single meeting at which people are introduced to one-another. At this stage there may be discussions about how the team will work, which can be frustrating for some members who simply want to get on with the team task.

The second stage is called a **storming** phase when the members of a team try to clarify their roles. The leader should be aware of the fact that some members feel uncomfortable and will strive for a change, some others will ask questions about the goal and resist taking on tasks. This is the stage when many teams fail because they try to focus on the job but very often without the support of their colleagues.

The next stage is called a **norming** stage during which a hierarchy is established. Team members come to respect a leader's authority and show leadership in specific areas. Now that the team members know each other better, they may be socializing together, and they are able to ask each other for help and provide constructive criticism. The team is able to develop a stronger commitment to the team goal

When the team reaches the **performing** stage, the team members progress towards the shared vision of their goal, some team members joining or leaving the team without affecting the performance. A lot of work is delegated by the leader.

As teams exist only for a fixed period, there may come an **adjourning** stage suitable for reaching the goal and personal conclusions**.** Obviously, the break up of the team can be hard for members who like routine or who have developed close working relationships with other team members.

The team leader's task is to help the team reach and sustain high performance as soon as possible, which involves changing the approach at each stage. The leader should be able to identify which stage of the team development his or her team is, consider the needs of the team to move towards the *performing* stage, and to help the team to work effectively.

4. Conflict management

For most of people the word *conflict* has negative connotations, but if no conflicts occur during team working, the team will probably not be effective. Therefore, the dominating opinion nowadays is that conflict is necessary part of team working on condition that the conflict is productive and positive. When team members face conflict, a recommendation is to use one of three modes of conflict resolution – *flight*, *fight* or *unite*.

Flight mode appears when team members do not want to engage in a conflict. In some situation sit can be a proper strategy, but in others avoidance can make the problem worse.

Fight requires team members to be involved in some confrontations and usually leads to the win-lose situation. Two parties become opponents and one party is a winner while the other one is a loser.

The *unite* approach means that team members are joint problem solvers, not adversaries, and the team is united against the problem. There are no arguing positions in the team and team members focus on the interests they share. It is necessary to be aware of the fact that the unite approach requires effective listening and participation of all team members.

Cultural differences sometimes create obstacles to effective team work that can be recognized only after they have already damaged communication and relationship in the team. It is the manager´s responsibility then to identify the underlying cultural reasons of conflict, choose the right strategy, and to intervene. The most frequent causes of conflicts in multicultural teams are as it was mentioned above especially hierarchy and other phenomena related to Hofstede´s culture dimensions, but also decision making, direct versus indirect communication styles, and the language.

According to Brett, Behfar and Kern (2006, pp. 85-97) team members coming from some cultures where they are treated differently according to their status in an organization. In a team, where the majority belongs to an egalitarian culture, they can even feel humiliation if their status in their home country is high. There are a lot of examples of the North Americans cooperating with the Koreans in the situations when the Americans complain to the higher Korean management causing embarrassment and nearly damaging of the deal.

Decision making can be a source of conflicts as it can differ in terms of speed and analysis made before it. Some cultures prefer fast decision making while other insist on long analyzing the topic re-discussing the most important points. The only possible way

seams to respect the other approach to decision making. It is necessary to control impatience on one side and learn asking explicit questions related to specific issues.

Another problem occurring during working in multicultural teams that can cause a serious damage to relationships may be direct versus indirect communication. In Western countries communication is mostly direct and explicit while in Asian cultures, for example, the dominating style is indirect and implicit. In the first case it means that the meaning in on the surface, but in the one much information is hidden in the context and it takes a lot of time before the individuals belonging to this type of culture are sure that there is harmony and agreement within their team.

Even if the international language of business communication is English, there can occur misunderstandings related to non-natives´ pronunciation, accent, and lack of fluency. Sometimes the most experienced members of a team with their high expertise cannot express their ideas, which leads to frustration, impatience, and even to interpersonal conflicts. Having side conversations in native languages can also deteriorate the situation and annoy the other side.

There are numerous strategies how to overcome conflicts in multicultural teams, but the most efficient one seems to be adaptation in terms of team members´ willingness to identify culture differences and overtaking responsibility for living with them. This approach does not require much managerial time as the team members participate in solving the conflict themselves and learn from the process, preserving their national cultures at the same time.

5. Team development and conflict management in multicultural teams within the project Effective Communication In Multicultural Teams

Some of the above mentioned potential problems and conflicts related to multicultural team management have been experiences and faced during the Intensive Programme **Effective Communication in Multicultural Teams** approved in 2011 and to be held in March 2012 involves six higher education institutions which develop a common course module to be recognised in each of the curricula of the partner institutions – Université Jean Monnet de Saint-Etienne in France (the coordinator), Technische Hochschule Wildau in Germany, Fachhochschule Salzburg GmbH in Austria, University of Joensuu in Finland, The University of Tartu in Estonia, and School of Business Administration in Karviná, Silesian University in Opava, in the Czech Republic.

The programme Erasmus IP involves intensive two weeks of working together both of students and teachers from six different institutions and different disciplines in order to reflect and develop their communication skills while working in multicultural workgroups. At the same time they receive input from professors and practitioners from various backgrounds, who encourage them to adopt a wide range of approaches in creating an own case study in multicultural teams.

During the course programme, students are given a balance of hands-on experience and theoretical issues, have an opportunity to introduce the various actors of the programme and set clear guidelines (methodology used self-assessment tools, expectations and learning outcomes). The course ends with a series of students' presentations during which they expose their recommendations for their case study to a jury of academics and professionals. The presentations are assessed and the best one is awarded a prize.

Moreover, all the participants of the programme develop their skills related to IT, especially to working with the Moodle. It is a software programme aimed at the support of regular and distance learning using online courses available from WWW. It enables easy publication of study materials, establishing discussion forums, collecting electronic assessment, creating online tests, and other activities for support of teaching.

The task of the Czech team at the first run of the IP held in France in 2012 was to introduce the method of case studies and critical incidents in the example of a Czech controversial Kofola commercial showing a love affair between the teacher and a student. Students working in multicultural teams were supposed to follow the steps in the case study method and express their opinions about the acceptability of the commercial in their cultures. Most of Scandinavian students thought that the effectiveness of the ad is important and it is the role of parents to explain the difference between the real life and the world of ad. However, generally the ad is non ethical, but at the same time it is funny.

The French were more relaxed and open than the other members of the team, but for the students of the Moroccan origin a flirting relationship is not acceptable and it destroys the authority of the teacher, but they appreciate the funny side of the ad. For the people of Chinese origin this kind of ad is offensive and the relationship between a student and a teacher is unimaginable.

The following task was related to creating case studies and three critical incidents. It was very positive that the students were able to integrate the skills about a case study creation and drama activities. They presented output in 6 groups. The topics of the case studies and critical incidents concerned food prohibitions in Islam, word traps in Italian

and Finnish languages, a conflict between Chinese and French based on proxemics and haptics, and controversial commercials of Benetton involving kissing politicians from different political and religious background (Heinz, 2010, pp. 177-182).

The second run of the IP was held in Austria in 2013 and the goal was to create an international project and present it to the public. The teams of students and teachers had to face numerous problems, sometimes even conflicts during working in multicultural teams. The problems in students´ teams were mostly related to the team members who were too authoritative, in many teams the students from Germany and Austria became leaders as they seemed to be perfectly prepared for working on projects, working systematically and focused on the output. The members of the Czech team faced some difficulties in interaction in English and also were surprised at innovative methods used at the course. Finnish and Estonian teams proved to be very efficient in IT, but in some cases not very communicative, while the French team was multicultural itself and involved non-native students and had a lot of experience in contact with students of different culture background.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration theoretical background and personal experiences with working in multicultural teams, it is necessary to state that managing diversity, especially conflict situations, requires a certain extent of adaptation to changes. If the members of the team are not able to do it, diversity can result in conflict, low productivity, and deteriorating relationships. The mentioned findings have been confirmed both by teachers´and students´ of multicultural teams working within the project *Effective Communication in Multicultural Teams*, therefore it is necessary to monitor the dynamics of the multicultural team development to ensure its effective working.

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Multicultural team conflict management

Abstract

The article presents the potential problems related to conflict resolution while cooperating in multicultural teams. Special attention is paid to specific character of such teams as well as to the concept of productive conflict and the ways of resolving it. The experiences gained in the Erasmus Intenstive Programme - Effective Working in Multicultural Teams were used.

Key words: *conflict, management, multicultural team, European project*