

## **Cross Cultural Conflict Resolution in Teams**

Summary:

A brief article outlining the basic tenants of cross-cultural conflict resolution, including individualist versus collectivist approaches to conflict. The author gives strategies for successful team-building within diverse groups, advocating communication and empathy.

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Team members work in increasingly diverse environments: in terms of age (there are more older workers), gender (there are more women), race (there are more people of color), language (there are more languages spoken), and nationality (there are more immigrants). Beyond these differences, there are also deeper cultural differences that influence the way conflict is approached.

The use of teams represents an important change in the way we work. The theory is that through the interdependency of the parts greater productivity is achieved by the whole. Experience has been less kind. One reason that teams fail to meet performance expectations is their paralysis through unresolved conflict. This article focuses on the impact of culture on the prevention and resolution of conflict in teams.

### **Teams Dynamics**

Over time successful teams develop culturally distinct pathways to communicate, problem solve, make decisions, and resolve conflict. Most literature on teams suggests that they realize high performance levels by passing through four distinct development phases: 'forming', 'storming', 'norming' and 'performing'.

The development of team norms does not take place in a vacuum, but is embedded in the wider social, political and economic context of the day. Another reality is that team members do not have access to the same power. Sources of power differ, as do expectations about how and when it will be used.

Writing for a North American audience, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan have suggested that a successful team will:

- be comfortable dealing with conflict
  - be committed to resolving disputes close to the source
  - resolve disputes based on interests before rights and power
  - learn from experience with conflicts.
- (Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan)

This ties in with research on the effects of interpersonal conflict in teams. A team member's commitment to the team and the team mission can increase if conflict is well-managed and

resolved, but decreases if conflict goes unresolved. If unhealthy conflict goes unresolved for too long, team members are likely to quit or to search for alternatives. (Wallace Bishop and Dow Scott)

## **Defining Culture**

Social anthropology, as the academic field responsible for the study of culture, has yet to settle on a definition of culture. However, for our practical purposes, culture is defined as the shared set of values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, behaviors, and social structures that define reality and guide everyday interactions. (Adapted from Moore and Woodrow).

This definition implies that culture is an attribute of a group, and also contemplates the fact that there may be as much variation within the group as between different groups. We often associate culture with a national group, however, culture includes ethnic groups, clans, tribes and organizations. Teams within organizations also have beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that constitute unique cultures.

Although there are many similarities between cultures, it is important not to minimize real differences that do exist.

A useful tool for considering the cultures of different groups is the bell curve. The majority of a group culture will confirm to a dominant set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, but there will be members of the cultural group that differ in significant ways from the norm.

## **Individualistic and Collectivist Dimensions of a Culture**

An important dimension of culture is the extent to which members identify with the group (in this case the team) rather than themselves as individuals. Individualistic cultures place a high value on "autonomy, initiative, creativity, and authority in decision making." (Moore and Woodrow) Individual interests trump group interests, and any group commitment is a function of a perceived self-benefit.

Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, value the group above the individual. Group conformity and commitment is maintained at the expense of personal interests. Harmony, getting along and maintaining 'face' are seen as crucial.

The dominant culture in the USA, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand is individualistic, while collectivism predominates the rest of the world. However examples of both are found everywhere. In California where the recent census found that 32% of the population is Hispanic, 7% are African American and 10% are of Asian descent, it can safely be assumed that a relatively high percentage of the workforce comes from a social environment that is collectivist.

## **Comfort with Conflict**

Individualists and collectivists view conflict differently. Collectivists, who place a high value on harmony, getting along and 'face' see conflict as a sign of social failure. As a result, comfort levels with conflict situations, especially of an interpersonal nature are low. Conflict is often avoided.

While many individualists also feel discomfort with conflict, it is acknowledged as an inevitable part of life that must be dealt with. However, being in conflict with another is not necessarily something to be ashamed about.

### **Involvement and Role of Third Parties**

Team members from a collectivist culture will probably be more comfortable with a fellow team member addressing a conflict, rather than bringing in someone from the outside. Individualists, on the other hand, may prefer an impartial outsider, whose relationship to the team is remote—such as a Human Resource representative or external mediator.

The expected role of the third party is also influenced by cultural dimensions. In western, individualistic cultures mediation has evolved as a process in which the third party does not make decisions for the disputants. Some mediators provide an evaluation of the strengths and weakness and they are described as evaluative. At the other end of this continuum are mediators who do not make evaluations. They are purely facilitative.

In collectivist cultures, mediators are often expected to provide counsel, evaluate and advise in an effort to restore harmony. Disputants engage a third party precisely because they are unable to find a solution themselves.

### **Communication Styles**

There are a number of factors that contribute to communication style. One factor is the extent to which it is expressive or restrained. Some team members may have been socialized to reveal strong emotions and to feel comfortable with prolonged eye contact and touch. Others may be more stoic, and mask emotions with a poker face, use monotone speech and avoid eye contact.

These different communication styles are not problematic in and of themselves. However, problems arise when value judgments are made on the basis of the different styles. For example, if team members disagree and one represents his views and feelings forcefully with a raised voice, another more restrained team member may see that as arrogant. The same 'arrogant' team member may conclude that the restrained team member is untrustworthy because eye contact is not maintained.

Another area of difference relates to directness. Some cultures are very direct. They like to 'cut to the chase' and get frustrated with someone who 'beats around the bush'. Indirect cultures prefer to deal with relational aspects first, and to restore harmony before addressing substantive issues.

### **Negotiation Style**

Negotiation is a means to satisfy needs. It can be broken down into one of two approaches- positional and interest based. Positional negotiation involves haggling over extreme positions without a clear understanding of underlying interests. By contrast, an interest based approach focuses on the needs and concerns of the disputants. An interest based approach is widely used by conflict resolution practitioners, especially in western cultures. It has been popularized through books such as "Getting to Yes" (Fisher, Ury and Patton) but the extent of its internalization is limited.

Teams should consider their own negotiation styles and make an explicit decision as to whether they will use an interest based or positional negotiation approach.

During negotiations, cultures that prefer a direct communication style will seek direct, face to face communication rather than indirect shuttle diplomacy.

There are other cultural factors that have a bearing on the way a team will approach conflict prevention and resolution. These include:

- our relationship to **time** (Whether we are monochronic and do one thing at a time or polychronic and do several things at once. Whether we expect the process to have a start and end or to be an ongoing process)
- our relationship to **rules** (Whether we value rules and order over feelings and relationships)
- our relationship to **venue** (Whether we are private or public, indoor or outdoor, formal or informal)

## **Lessons**

Given that teams are comprised of diverse individuals with unique cultural backgrounds, what lessons can we distill for the successful prevention and resolution of conflict?

### **1. Know Yourself and Your Own Culture**

Starting with yourself, examine your own beliefs, values, biases, and prejudices. How do you behave? What are your hot buttons? Locate your individual culture in the context of your family, regional, and national cultures. What is the social, political and economic context of the day? Being aware of our own cultures helps us to be open to different ideas. We are able to compare and contrast different approaches without being threatened.

### **2. Learn others' expectations**

We should, as Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service Commissioner Jan Sunoo has suggested, expect different expectations. (Sunoo) The only way we will know what our team members expect is to have an explicit conversation about the nature of conflict and how we prefer to deal with it when it arises. This should lead to a more general conversation that addresses how the team wants to work together. The sooner this happens the better. We can also read books and watch movies to understand others culture. Learning about a new culture takes

time. Some liken culture to an iceberg where over nine tenths is out of sight. So it is with culture. There is the surface culture, and then there is that which is hidden-deep culture.

### **3. Check Your Assumptions**

As we filter incoming information through our senses (Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) it is natural to make assumptions. We should develop acceptable communication protocols to check out the basis of our perceptions. Failure to do so leads to inaccurate stereotypes and may foster negative feelings of hostility.

One approach is to give specific feedback on the behavior you observed ("I noticed that you avoided eye contact when we were discussing the situation.") and to seek clarification of your interpretations. ("I suppose you could have been bored. Can you tell me what was going on?") Be open to various interpretations. Your first interpretation is not necessarily correct. Another variation is to give feedback on how you felt when the specified behavior occurred. ("I felt ignored when you avoided eye contact during our discussion. Can you tell me what was going on?") It sometimes helps to list all the possible interpretations you have thought of almost as if brainstorming.

### **4. When in Rome . . . ask questions**

Does the old saying-When in Rome, do as the Romans-still have currency? After all, suggestions to learn about other cultures are so we can anticipate how situations will be dealt with and avoid conflict. Some go so far as to say this is necessary to show respect: "When we join a team that already exists we should learn and be respectful of the existing culture, just as we would when we travel."

The danger of this adage, not only in a team environment, is that it supports the prevailing/dominant culture and a rigidity that is counter productive to creativity and growth. Newcomers/immigrants who do not conform to the majority views of Romans may be expected to fall in line or 'go back to where they came from.'

The reformulation of the adage to encourage questions reflects an attitude of inquiry. Rather than assuming you know, you ask to clarify why things are being done differently. Open ended questions are generally less threatening, but close ended questions will often eliminate confusion on a particular aspect of culture.

### **5. Listen**

Listening is widely acknowledged as a key conflict prevention and resolution skill. Care should be taken not to impose an approach to listening that causes discomfort. Not all cultures are comfortable expressing feelings in public.

Used in a team environment effective listening enables new norms to emerge that reflect a deep knowledge for one another's 'ways.' This level of multi cultural maturity will not always be achieved, and the norms will often reflect an issue by issue compromise by the different cultures

present. Each team member will adhere to their own ways, and when their culture conflicts with others, adopt the others through a mix match of procedures. However, a compromise over cultural norms is better the imposition of values by a dominant group.

## **6. Consider the Platinum Rule**

The Platinum rule encourages us to treat our team members as they would like to be treated rather than the way we like to be treated (the golden rule). It is similar to the difference between sympathy and empathy. Empathy is not about "walking a mile in his moccasins" but imagining "how he feels walking in his moccasins." Problems with the platinum rule arise when your way and the others way clash.

## **7. All conflict is multi cultural**

There is as much diversity within a culture as between cultures. Thus, rather than thinking that we should use our cross cultural communication skills when we communicate between different cultural groups, we should assume that all communications are essentially cross cultural. It helps to remember that men and women form the two largest cultural groups.

## **Conclusion**

One challenge of working in a team environment is that it is essentially multi cultural. Another is that conflict will arise from time to time. How your team chooses to respond can often be the difference between success and failure. The importance of talking about conflict prevention and resolution issues up front cannot be overstressed. It will go a long way to the enhanced productivity that is expected from a team that is performing well.

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# Biography



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**John Ford** works to support individuals and organizations approach conflict with greater confidence and effect. In addition to serving as managing editor for Mediate.com since 2000, John is a past president of the Association for Dispute Resolution of Northern California. He continues to mediate workplace, health care and elder disputes, teach mediation in the graduate school of professional psychology at JFK University, and provide skill-based corporate training in communication, negotiation, conflict resolution emotional literacy and mediation.

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