

Eliminating Culture Conflicts

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One of the biggest management challenges in a global economy is learning to manage cross-cultural teams. Years ago I had a conversation with a Japanese engineer. He had gotten his undergraduate degree in Japan and his graduate degree in the U.S. I asked him what he felt was the biggest difference in pursuing degrees in two countries. His answer was, "the size of the book." I asked him if that was because of the difference in the amount of space kanji (Japanese characters) and English characters required. He shook his head and went on to explain that Japan is a homogeneous society where everyone is educated the same way. Books are very short because everyone has the same frame of reference in terms of the concepts introduced. Conversely, students in the U.S. come from a diverse set of educational experiences. Books need to be longer to ensure that explanations are detailed enough to provide everyone with the same educational foundation. From a sociological standpoint, cultural perspectives are a lot like the example. Some cultures are high context,

meaning there is an unwritten set of behaviors that everyone in that culture understands. Such is the case in Asia, India, the Middle East, and Latin America. Conversely, low context cultures, like the U.S., have a broad spectrum of acceptable behaviors. Culture clashes arise when someone from a high context culture encounters an outsider who doesn't know or understand the behavioral rules. As a manager, how can you eliminate culture clashes in cross-cultural teams? First, learn about the cultures of the people on your team. This may be simple if team members are not culturally diverse, but challenging if several cultures are represented. Second, create an environment where team members feel comfortable discussing what is working and what is not. Many times conflict that occurs over the "right way to do things" goes away when people discuss the differences in their perceptions, allowing them to reach a mutually agreeable solution. In negotiations, cultural conflict often arises in regions where arguing is considered rude. Cultures in Mexico and most of Asia are high context and very polite. For example, in Asia disagreement can lead to loss of face. Within many countries in Asia, the preferred solution is just to avoid discussion of issues one party disagrees with in order to eliminate the possibility that the other party will lose face when proven wrong. In Mexico, there tends to be strong desire to avoid disappointing others by saying no to requests. The more common solution is that person being asked to do something, agrees to the request, tries his hardest and has a really good reason for failure when the desired result is not achieved. Additionally, in Mexico, there is little difference between criticism of a behavior and criticism of the individual, so refusing to "try hard" to fulfill a request potentially tells the requestor that he showed bad judgment in making the request. Conversely, in U.S. negotiations, telling a requestor that the request can't be fulfilled or offering several achievable alternatives is considered the best course of action. Another area where cultural conflict can arise is in communications. For example, in technical discussions, language differences often drive the biggest communications mistakes. In many cases, it isn't a pure lack of second language competency. Instead, it is a combination of use of unfamiliar jargon and fear of the embarrassment associated with not speaking the language as well as the others in the room. In countries other than the U.S., fluency in multiple languages is considered the norm. People viewed as not being fluent are perceived as less competent than peers with better language skills. In a high context culture, they may even be ridiculed. But, even individuals who are highly fluent in multiple languages may not be fluent in localized idioms, company-specific acronyms or jargon. The tie between fluency and competency discourages questions on points which aren't entirely clear. As a result, an individual who speaks English as a second language, may agree to what he thinks you said rather than ask the questions necessary to fully understand a project objective. Good communications practices include:

- **Creating an environment that encourages questions.**
- **Avoiding the use of idioms, jargon and acronyms that may not be universally understood.**
- **Using both written and oral communications to achieve a common understanding.**
- **Speaking slowly and repeating key points to allow time to process information.**
- **Testing comprehension by asking listeners to restate key points and commitments.**

Finally, communications style is important. For example, in Mexico where politeness is valued, it is customary to begin a conversation by asking questions about family or personal well-being, rather than jumping straight to business. Being “short” in responses can have consequences. Years ago while working in Mexico, I came out of a meeting with a long and time sensitive action list. My secretary met me at my office door with a stack of phone messages. I looked at her and said briskly, “Not now, Veronica.” The minute I said it I could see the hurt look on her face. We had previously had a great working relationship, and it took months to repair the damage I’d done by not taking the time to talk with her. From a U.S. management style perspective, I’d done nothing wrong. From a Mexican cultural perspective, I had been inexcusably rude. Working cross culturally is a continuous learning experience. By understanding the cultural behaviors of your team members, openly discussing individual differences and similarities, and creating an environment where people feel welcome to share their concerns, you can eliminate cultural conflict and build strong cross cultural teams.

About the Author



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Susan Mucha is president of Powell-Mucha Consulting, Inc., a consulting services firm for the electronics manufacturing services (EMS) industry. Prior to founding PMCI in 2001, she spent 20 years in the EMS industry in sales and marketing management positions, including four years as an officer of a multinational NASDAQ-traded electronics firm. She has served as adjunct faculty in both University of Phoenix’s undergraduate program and Webster University’s MBA program. In 2008, she authored Find It. Book It. Grow It. A Robust Process for Account Acquisition in Electronics Manufacturing Services.