



TEAM BUILDING TO BREAK DOWN CULTURAL BARRIERS

“Functional interdependency” ... “work group cohesion” ... to paraphrase Shakespeare, a rose by any other name is still a rose. And team building, no matter what it’s called, requires people to work together in a systematic, unified way to reach the group’s objectives.

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Effective team building is inspiring when it happens and it is a challenge to achieve. It happens by design, not happenstance and it becomes even more complicated in a culturally diverse work environment where norms, values, traditions, and priorities may seem foreign and out of synch with one another.

But take heart. There are a number of things that can be done to foster cohesion and cooperation in a multicultural workgroup.

1. ENCOURAGE SHARED VALUES

For any group to function well as a team, there must be a commonly shared set of assumptions, expectations, and priorities.

Some examples of an organization’s values might be:

- Our organization is a venerable, respected institution with a rich history and legacy.
- At our store, no effort at customer satisfaction is too great.
- Our company is an industry leader with innovative products.

When the company’s values are shared, each group member has a common purpose. Instilling your team with shared values is the best way to overcome bickering within a culturally diverse or any work group.

For example, on any sports team, the goal is to play well and win the game. The cultural origin of the players is irrelevant when the top priority is to catch, kick or throw the ball, score the most points and win.

The same thing happens in a work group. If the group shares the value of providing excellent customer service, then each member of the group will be appreciated for contributing to the end goal. Cultural differences become a non-issue when each player has his eye on the ball.

2. GET INPUT ON THE GROUP'S OBJECTIVES

Values may define the heart and soul of a work group, but goals and objectives give these values their direction and purpose - they are its life blood.

The only way to get "buy-in" is to get everyone's input in determining these goals and objectives. Doing this effectively requires cultural sensitivity and knowledge.

Imagine you are having a strategy meeting with your multi-cultural work group. You need to understand the existence of different norms to get the best from team members.

In the dominant American culture, it is savvy to speak up at meeting-, and "throw your two cents in." However, there are many cultures where this is not so. Sometimes giving input could be construed as diminishing an authority figure who by virtue of position is considered to have the answers. Using a variety of ways, from small groups to options for anonymous contributions is helpful.

3. REWARD EXCELLENCE

But do so in a way that feels like a reward. While working with organizations over the past thirty years, we discovered that in the dominant American culture a super achiever's exceptional performance is often spotlighted.

The theory holds that this attention both validates the individual and motivates others. Calling attention to high performers through awards, announcements, and pictures on bulletin boards works... in some cases. It can also embarrass and intimidate.

In some cultures, and for some individuals in any culture, this kind of attention could be an embarrassment or discomfort to the person. It is important to acknowledge excellence. Recognition reinforces continued high performance. However, do so in a way that the individual appreciates. Maybe a very quiet "thank you," a note in one's file or a simple nod of the head and a smile when looking at a report or a product, would be the real reward.

4. AVOID LIP SERVICE

Paying lip-service to valuing differences is easy. The hard part can be demonstrating the value in the work group. Don't waste time defining values if you aren't going to make them operational. Do not ask for participation if you do not plan to act on the information. Do not talk about treating people with dignity if you really don't care enough to learn the nuances of cultural norms.

You can't fool people so, "walk your talk" and remember the poetic words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "I can't hear what you're saying because you are rings so loudly in my ears."

5. ACKNOWLEDGE CULTURAL CONFLICTS

Conflict is normal and natural in *any* work group. Differing cultural norms on a team can be a catalyst for frustration and conflict on a team.

One boss we know complained because an employee took time off to take his wife to a routine doctor's appointment. The boss couldn't understand why the wife didn't go to the doctor by herself. The boss felt the employee was using this as an excuse to get time off work.

During a conversation with the employee, the boss learned that in the staff member's

culture, taking care of family was top priority and that his role as husband demanded he take his wife to a doctor's appointment.

Finding a resolution where the employee gets his work done and can still fulfill his family obligation is the best way to deal with cultural conflicts like these.

6. BECOME FLUENT IN THE "CULTURAL SOFTWARE"

Work groups can accommodate all kinds of differences, but not until we know what they are and understand them. Make sure that you use your curiosity to understand them and that your interpretations are accurate.

Make it your business to learn the various cultural norms of your employees new to your company or geographic region. Cross border norms require some learning but the U.S. is not all one culture either. We have had clients from parts of the U.S. where to demonstrate respect we are called ma'am. It is awkward for us but we get the custom and the positive intention.

Beyond exploring these six steps to intercultural team building, there is one other noteworthy item. Any leader or manager is a role model. Good, bad, or indifferent, the medium is the message and you are the medium. If you want a cohesive group and you want to minimize conflict from cultural differences among those from different backgrounds, realize that the group will get its message and take its cue from you.

Leadership starts at the top... so does tolerance, treating people with dignity, and valuing differences. A leader or manager genuinely committed to respecting diversity can show the way and help an entire organization reap the rewards.

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