Multicultural Team Development

By Lothar Katz

Jim was getting nervous. He had expected this to be much easier than it turned out. After all, he was quite an experienced team lead, albeit not with teams as diverse as this one.

The two French team members, Marc and Jean-Louis, were constantly at each other's throats, seemingly unable to agree on anything. Sandhya, the Indian, kept asking irrelevant questions, while the Chinese and Japanese team members, Weiwei, Xiong, and Hiroshi, were irritatingly silent and showed little interest in the tasks assigned to them.

More and more, leading this new team felt like herding cats. Cats with ADD, actually.

Forming a team with members from different countries and guiding it to high performance levels is one of the toughest leadership challenges. Leaders needs to closely monitor their team's progress and frequently adjust own behaviors to those of the team. A Western model originally presented by Bruce Tuckman recognizes four distinct team development stages:

Forming — Team members may not know each other at all, and levels of trust are low. People mostly remain passive; they commonly avoid serious issues and feelings. At this stage, it is crucial for the leader to educate the team on mission and objectives, roles and responsibilities, acceptable and expected behaviors, etc. In parallel, creating opportunities for relationship building is very important.

Storming — Team members start opening up to each other and confront others' ideas and perspectives. Different ideas compete for consideration in ways that can be contentious and sometimes unpleasant. If things go well, the team will develop trust and cohesion at this stage. The leader needs to 'sell' mission and objectives to the team and orchestrate the process, which can take a long time.

Norming — Team members have developed trust in each other and start taking responsibility for the team's success. The team agrees on a common goal and mutual plan to achieve it. The leader supports the team in developing shared norms.

Performing — Teams that reach this stage function as a unit. Members are motivated and competent; they trust each other enough to allow conflicts to become productive, and the team is able to make decisions without supervision. The leader mostly facilitates and delegates at this stage.

The good news: this model has universal applicability with domestic teams and global ones alike, as all teams share certain development characteristics. The not-so-good news: the leadership practices required to support the development of the team vary considerably across countries and regions, as culture-specific views of aspects such as the role of the leader, the value of relationships, and the importance of face-saving play a major role. What works well within one culture does not necessarily work with another.

At no stage is this more evident than during Storming. In the U.S., Canada, and several parts of Europe, teams usually storm 'automatically,' as competing perspectives become inevitable once individual members start voicing their ideas and concerns. Facilitating the process, the leader concentrates on two aspects: encouraging quieter members of the team to share their views, and challenging the most vocal ones to remain constructive, if needed. Should conflicts get intense and emotional, the leader steps in and helps resolve the dispute. There is general agreement in these countries, however, that bringing disagreements into the open is productive and helpful.

This concept of 'constructive conflict' is largely unknown in much of Asia and other parts of the world. Here, people expect everyone to save face and **not** openly share their thoughts and emotions. Leaders are authority figures whose statements and ideas are rarely, if ever, challenged. In these cultures, compliance with stated expectations and directives is the dominating team behavior. Members commonly do not indicate problems and issues on their own, as local management practices hold the leader responsible for staying 'in the know' and proactively identifying issues such as emerging conflict within a team. It can take substantial time for members to develop strong mutual trust and reach higher levels of team autonomy. Trying to accelerate the process by forcing conflicts to surface is often counterproductive.

So what is a leader to do whose team is comprised of members from different regions of the world?

The most important step is to reset your views of how team storming is supposed to happen. Once you realize that constructive conflict is not a universal concept and allow the Storming stage to look different, you are ready to create an environment that allows global team cohesion to develop. Use different, creative ways to identify issues and conflict. Because non-Western team members may bring up issues only if ordered to do so, ask them to discuss (as a group) the likeliest reasons why the team might fail and tell them to get back to you with their Top 5 list, for example. Let them work out the list on their own, and encourage a collaborative, rather than contentious, approach. Since there may be a risk of strong Western individualists keeping others on the team from voicing their concerns, split up the team into smaller groups with similar cultural backgrounds if needed.

Throughout the process, emphasize and encourage team harmony and togetherness, and educate your team members about the cultural differences within the team. Remember: the key to achieving a sense of 'one team' lies not in doing everything together but in nurturing a profound understanding of each other. **That** is your most important challenge when leading a multicultural team.

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