

# NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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## NEGOTIATING A WORKING CULTURE FOR A MULTICULTURAL TEAM



■ Raphael E. Lapin

A formidable challenge in the corporate world of today is managing culturally diverse teams. These challenges go far beyond cultural diversity and sensitivity training. When mismanaged, the performance, productivity, profitability and effectiveness of the entire organization will be impacted. To effectively manage a multicultural team, it is crucial to be proactive and negotiate a workable charter that takes cultural differences into account before problems arise. To do this however, requires an efficient, productive, manageable and operational framework. In this month's column we will provide a highly effective, step-by-step process to negotiate a working culture for a multi-cultural team.

### Categorizing Differences

Although there are an infinite number of cultural nuances, they all fall broadly into four categories. These are: **1)** communication differences; **2)** value priorities; **3)** attitude towards managing and management; and **4)** decision-making processes. By categorizing cultural differences in this manner, they become easier to acknowledge, name and deal with in a more organized way.

**Communication Differences.** In their simplest forms, communication differences manifest in terms of accents and fluency. A more subtle form is different understanding in the meaning of common terms. An example we experienced in working with a client was an American executive who innocently said to his Pakistani counterpart "Sounds like we have a plan". The Pakistani wanted nothing further to do with him. After further inquiry it became apparent that the Pakistani heard "Sounds like we have a devious scheme" and wanted no part of it. That was how he understood the word "plan". A further difference is direct ver-

sus indirect communication. In some cultures it is considered highly inappropriate to be direct. One would never tell a Japanese person directly he or she made a mistake but would rather hint indirectly perhaps with a question such as "What would the consequences be to the project if this piece was omitted?"

**Value Priorities.** Different cultures attach priorities to different values. High levels of customer service and integrity for example, may be a value for one while market expansion at a reasonable expense to customer service may be a value to the other. A poignant example are the Palestinians in Gaza who have not built it into a multi-billion dollar Mediterranean resort like Sharm-el Sheik, Eilat, Doha or Dubai. This is because to them, religious ideology is of a higher value than free-market capitalism.

**Attitudes on Managing and Management.** An example of differences towards managing and management might be flat organizational structures as opposed to more hierarchical ones. If a person from a hierarchical culture is put into a flat organization, he will wait to be told what to do and will appear not to exhibit any initiative. He will consistently defer to team members of higher status which will damage his credibility amongst members of a flat organizational culture. The consequence of this is that his potential contributions, talent and skill will be underutilized.

**Decision-making.** Some cultures may only feel comfortable making decisions after careful collection and analysis of data or lengthy deliberations within their organizations. They will feel pressured by other cultures that may reach decisions quickly with relatively little analysis or deliberation which is common among US managers.

### Generating Dialogue

The first step in negotiating a working charter is to generate team dialogue around these four categories. This is a crucial stage to un-

cover important information about cultural differences within the team and to establish a platform of understanding. To advance dialogue, ask questions such as "What obstacles to accurate and effective communication can you anticipate?" or "What might prevent you from feeling comfortable to express your opinions and ideas?"

You could also have the group list their top five values perhaps choosing from a team-generated list. Encourage the group to ask questions of each other, because good questions are the fuel for productive dialogue.

### Negotiating a Working Charter

After rigorous dialogue has occurred, understanding achieved and differing cultural norms acknowledged, the team is ready to collectively craft a working team charter. This charter should include measures as to how they will manage challenges in all four categories of cultural differences. It may include communication systems to minimize misunderstandings or possibly a group reorganization to reduce cultural friction. There could be agreed-upon triggers as to when higher management will be consulted. It may include a team decision-making process and a dispute resolution procedure. The team should be creative and innovative as they jointly brainstorm a working charter. Finally the charter should be documented and

signed by each member of the team. By using this framework and process, the power of diversity of a multi-cultural team will be harnessed to drive high levels of productivity and performance beyond that of a single-culture team.

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