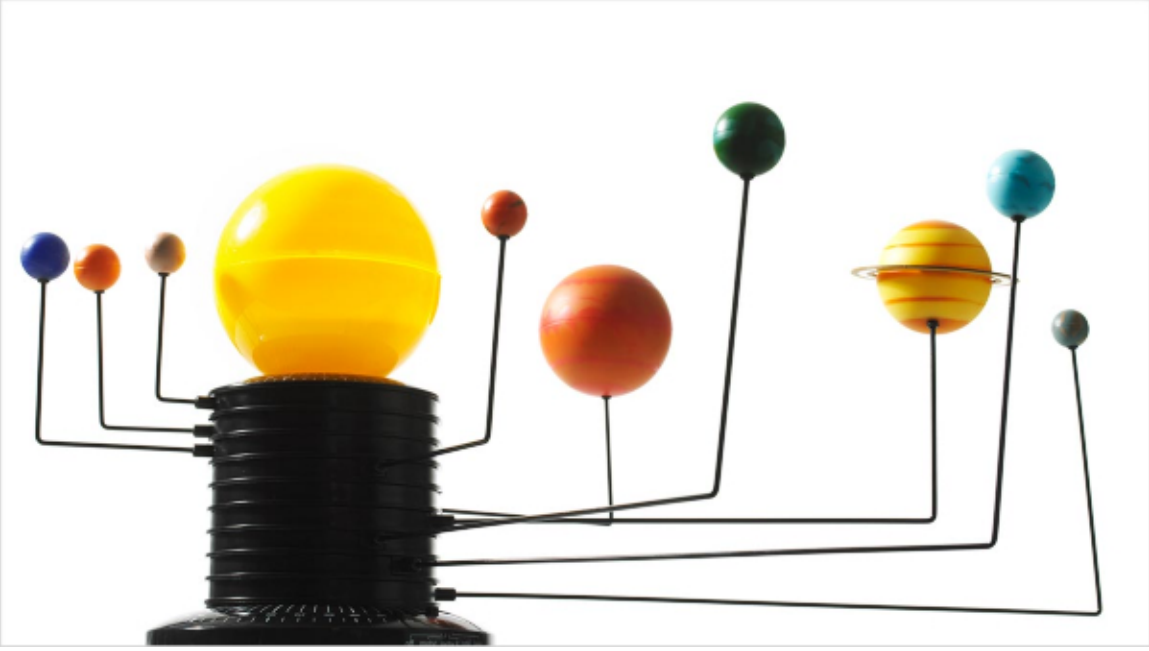
Harvard Business Review

CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

How to Run a Meeting of People from Different Cultures

by Rebecca Knight

DECEMBER 04, 2015



When you're running a meeting with people from different cultures, you need to consider your colleagues' different needs and approaches. How do you brainstorm ideas, make decisions, and address conflict in a way that is comfortable for everyone? Which culture's preferences should be the default? And how can you be sure that people who aren't from the dominant culture participate and are heard?

What the Experts Say

Multicultural meetings can be tricky to lead. "People bring their cultural baggage with them wherever they go—and that includes the workplace," says Jeanne M. Brett, professor of dispute resolution and negotiations at Kellogg School of Management. Communication styles vary from culture to culture as do notions of authority and hierarchy, which only heightens the potential for misunderstanding and hard feelings. "If you don't prepare for cultural differences and anticipate them at the front end, they're a lot harder to deal with after the fact," she says. It's daunting but you needn't feel overwhelmed, says Erin Meyer, a professor at INSEAD and the author of *The Culture Maps*. Approach your cross-cultural meeting with an open mind. And, have faith in your abilities because "you likely have more experience than you know," adds Andy Molinsky, professor of organizational behavior at Brandeis University International Business School and the author of the book *Global Dexterity*. "You've probably run meetings where there was quite a lot of diversity, be it gender diversity, functional diversity, seniority diversity, or just different personalities—culture is one more element," he says. Here are some ideas to help ensure that your multicultural meetings go smoothly.

Be mindful of differences...

The key to showing cultural sensitivity in the workplace is "being aware" of the variations that exist among cultures and how those differences play out, according to Molinsky. "There are differences in terms of how and where people are supposed to sit in meetings, the extent to which they get down to business at the start of a meeting versus how much time they spend socializing, the extent to which they're willing to provide feedback or argue publicly—there are so many different elements." Meyer recommends "learning as much as you possibly can about the people and the regions of the world you are collaborating with so that you can adjust your management style in small ways." Study up on a country's customs and professional practices and become an expert observer of others. It's a team effort. Provide your colleagues with reading material on cultural differences and encourage colleagues to think about how "their behavior is viewed so they can make adjustments too," she adds.

...But don't obsess over them

And yet, says Molinsky, "sometimes culture matters, sometimes it doesn't, and you can't always anticipate" how cultural differences play out. It's important to respect cultural norms but don't be rigid about them—and especially don't pigeonhole individuals and groups of people. "Culture is only one potential influence on a person's style, his behavior, and how he perceives things," he says. "You should have a working hypothesis but test it against evidence." As the boss and the person in charge of the meeting, you'll likely need to make some adjustments and adaptations to your management style, but stay true to yourself too. Don't be boorish or ignorant but also don't pretend to be someone you're not. "Maintain who you are," says Brett.

Set expectations

It's important to "create protocols and establish norms at the beginning" of your meetings, says Brett. "You want to be clear about what you expect and how meetings will run," she says. "This gives certain people the freedom to move outside their comfort zone, and it also gives you the freedom to

rein in others." Say, for instance, some of your colleagues come from a culture where punctuality is not adhered to but you want meetings to start and end in a timely manner. "You need to demonstrate that you understand different cultural behavior but also explain why you think it's critical for people to show up to meetings on time and that people [who are late] will suffer the consequences," says Molinsky. "Be explicit. There are deal breakers." Structure and protocol "can override or supersede cultural norms" in other ways too. If, for instance, you want to hold a group brainstorming session but some of your colleagues are from a culture that's typically reticent, you can ensure participation by asking "everyone to go around the room and spend two minutes describing their point of view on a particular problem," he says. "Institute rules" that are clear and that everyone follows.

Build relationships

Getting to know the personalities on your team is sound management practice in any culture, but it's especially important when your team comprises people from different countries. "You need to know the people on your team and figure out the extent to which culture is an issue for each individual," says Molinsky. Say, for instance, one of your team members comes from a hierarchical culture and is loath to provide feedback to a senior colleague. "If you would like him to speak up in a meeting, you need to talk with him beforehand and strategize with him on how he can adapt his behavior," he says. Alternatively, "you need to forgive him for not doing it." Focus too on forging bonds and fostering trust among your team members, says Meyer. "Invest time upfront on building emotional bonds so that people on your team have opportunities to get to know each other by sharing meals or talking over drinks," she says. "That way a lot of the cultural differences [that appear in the workplace] won't matter as much."

Be creative with conflict

When it comes to professional meetings, one of the biggest cultural differences is the degree to which open debate and disagreement are viewed as a positive, according to Meyer. "In countries like Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand, saying: 'I disagree,' is seen as very aggressive and could lead to a break in the relationship, whereas in France and Russia, it's seen as a great opportunity to build a relationship," she says. While "individual adjustments like softening your language" can be effective, it's also worth trying to make your team more comfortable with conflict. Meyers suggests that before the meeting, you ask your team members to email their ideas and thoughts to a central organizing body that will be grouped by theme and shared once everyone is together. "That way you're disagreeing with an idea, not a colleague," she says. "It's not personal."

Be flexible

Meetings are only one element of the flow of workplace decision-making. There are pre-meetings, post meetings, informal, one-on-one conversations in the corridor, and impromptu group discussions. If cultural differences are making group meetings particularly tricky, try "soliciting coworkers' opinions in other venues and giving people an opportunity to provide feedback in different ways," says Molinsky. "Be flexible about the process," says Brett. "Consider breaking up your group into smaller subgroups." And remember, adds Meyer, "In many countries, the formal meeting is not the place to hash out ideas—it's to put a stamp on what we've already decided in pre-

meetings," she says. In other words, don't put too much stock in what takes place in the conference room. "Recognize that in many cultures the tough stuff is done off-line, one-on-one."

Consider rewards

"It's really hard for people to overcome their cultural behaviors because they're so ingrained," says Brett. But if you're concerned that cultural differences are having a negative impact on your team's capacity for growth and change, you need to think about ways to incentivize and push your colleagues outside their cultural comfort zones during meetings. "You need to institutionalize rewards around what you're trying to motivate people to do so that it's hardwired in," says Molinsky. Say, for instance, you want to encourage more open conflict and feedback at meetings, but your workforce is conflict averse. In this case, you could "make providing feedback part of their performance evaluations" and a prerequisite for promotion. They get rewards when they do it well and perhaps even penalties if they fail. It's not easy but "it's definitely possible to encourage and train people to behave in ways that might not feel natural," says Meyer.

Principles to Remember

Do

- Study up on the variations that exist among cultures and how those differences play out in the workplace
- Create protocols and establish norms so that your colleagues understand how meetings will run
- Incentivize colleagues to step outside their cultural comfort zones by institutionalizing rewards around what you're trying to motivate people to do

Don't

- Be hung up on how people from certain cultures are supposed to act—remember, people are capable of adapting and adjusting their cultural default
- Force a perfect dynamic in meetings—solicit colleagues' opinions in other venues and encourage people to provide feedback in different ways
- Overlook the importance of team bonding—encourage colleagues to get to know each other outside of meetings so that cultural differences won't seem as glaring

Case Study #1: Break large meetings into subgroups to encourage open conversation

As Accenture's Managing Director of Global Inclusion and Diversity, Nellie Borrero spends a lot of her time facing the challenges of cross-cultural interactions in the workplace. "What I've learned over the years is that you need to look at how people operate through a cultural lens—don't judge it, but think creatively about how to engage them and get the best out of each person," she says.

A few years ago, she organized a "woman's day" program in the Tokyo office as a way to inspire Accenture's junior employees to build their careers at the company and show them what was

possible. “Many of our Japanese company leaders—the majority of which are male—were there to showcase their support,” Nellie says.

Midway through the program, one of the facilitators tried to spark a group discussion by asking the young women to share their experiences and their professionals concerns. “The room was silent,” she recalls. But Nellie was confident that the women there were interested in the topic because of the high number of registrants. “I was sitting in the back watching all this when I realized that there were cultural norms at play. They didn’t feel comfortable talking.”

Nellie walked to the front of the room and addressed the audience. “I am going to ask some questions that I think are on your mind: How do leaders here handle work/life integration? How do they become more comfortable about speaking up? How can I ‘own my career’ [at Accenture]? I saw the body language shift and people became suddenly more engaged,” she says.

She then broke up the audience into sub-teams of five or six so they could talk about these topics in a more intimate setting. After 20 minutes of small group discussion, the larger group reconvened and one person from each team served as a spokesperson to the rest of the audience.

It’s a model she’s used in other locations, including Latin America, and one she encourages other managers to try. “Creating cultural awareness is a beautiful thing.”

Case Study #2: Be clear about your expectations

A few year years ago, MichaelAaron Flicker, the president of XenoPsi, the New York City-based advertising agency, promoted one of his top programmers—we’ll call him Haalim. “At the time, Haalim was a mid-level employee based in Pakistan, and we gave him the opportunity to take the lead and manage a team for a six month-long project,” says MichaelAaron. “He’d been with us for three years and this was a major development for him. He had earned his stripes.”

One of Haalim’s direct reports was John, an American in his mid-50s and a specialist in a certain type of coding. As the leader, Haalim was supposed to run all team meetings and also report to management on a weekly basis about the team’s progress. “At the first couple of status updates, we noticed that John was the one giving us reports. But we figured that John was helping Haalim because it was his first time leading a project,” recalls MichaelAaron.

But as the weeks went by, nothing changed. MichaelAaron decided to talk to both John and Haalim one-on-one about team dynamics. Both said the team was operating well. “It was only when we got everyone together in the room and dug a little deeper that we realized that Haalim thought he was being culturally appropriate by being deferential to John, who was about 20 years older,” he says. “It never occurred to him to do it any other way.”

For MichaelAaron it was a wakeup call that he needed to be more culturally aware; he also realized he needed to be clearer about his expectations. He and other managers talked to Haalim about what

they wanted from team leaders and together they strategized how Haalim could manage John. “Through a number of conversations, we helped Haalim build a leadership model that involved his working together with John as a partner,” he says.

Those discussions proved to be turning point. Today Haalim is a respected member of XenoPsi’s leadership team.

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.