Abstract

This article reviews sources that emphasize the connection between intercultural communication with leadership and decision making in multicultural teams. Expectations about leadership, decision making and communication are culturally defined. People have cultural patterns that are primarily formed in the environment of their childhood home. The review indicates that people bring their cultural preferences to the team environment cultural preferences affect how people view leaders and interpret their actions in decision making and communication. Differences in cultural practices cause division among team members. Team members and leaders need training in skills that focus on intercultural communication that is effective in building trust, resolving problems, leading effectively and making decisions within the context of a multicultural team, helping them to forge a new cultural paradigm for the team.

Introduction

An overarching component in multicultural teams is communication. Diverse values, beliefs, attitudes, customs, and thoughts are brought by the team members. Therefore, understanding other team member’s intentions, messages and expectations, as well as clearly expressing their own, is fundamental not only for the effectiveness of the team, but for its very existence. Expectations about leadership, decision making and communication are culturally defined. Although leadership is modeled differently among cultures, those that lead are always major players in making and communicating decisions. Cultural preferences affect how people view leaders and interpret their actions in decision making and communication.
By recognizing these preferences and determining together to work through their differences, a team will be more effective in their work and more satisfied in their relationships. It is increasingly important that people who serve as leaders and members of multicultural teams understand intercultural communication.

**Intercultural Communication: The Connecting of Cultures**

Communication is complex even in the best of situations. Shared values, attitudes, beliefs, customs and thoughts by a majority of people within a society create a central culture. These shared cultural components create cultural preferences, or the preferred way of doing things, with the people who are formed within that culture.

Behavior is visual and usually affects other people and is therefore the part of a person that people first notice and respond to. There is a reason people behave as they do and there are meanings behind their words and their actions. In a multicultural setting, these diverse cultural preferences are bound to clash. What they say and how they say it also affects the dynamics of the relationship. Cultural differences create a sense of suspicion, distrust and even fear if they are misunderstood. As a result, communication can be extremely complex as people from diverse cultures interact on issues where their cultural preferences do not coincide.

Communication involves more than speaking. It involves the constructs of the wider part of life of a person, conveying not only what they say but also who they are and what they believe. When people of diverse cultures share information, both orally and through body language, it is often cultural in nature. Their words and actions are loaded with cultural meanings built on foundational beliefs and values they have been taught. Therefore, in order for there to be effective communication that makes sense, each person has to make an intentional effort to truly understand the other. Lahey, et al. mentions three practices that distinguish competent intercultural communicators: adopting the correct attitude, acquiring the correct knowledge, and developing specific skills.

**Cultural Identity: Where Culture Connects with the Person**

People's foundational beliefs, values and preferences concerning the meaning of life and how to live life are formed within the constraints of a dominant culture, primarily in their childhood home and among their peers. These are reinforced as they engage with others of their culture and as they make a deeper commitment to the community. Their identity is connected with the way they were disciplined and nurtured. These are powerful foundational forces in a person's life. Situations such as working together on a multicultural team brings people into direct contact with others who have significantly different cultural preferences and practices, requiring them to communicate across cultural boundaries. This can produce discomfort in people because of a lack of shared meanings which provokes an experience called culture shock, causing them to evaluate the cultural preferences of the other. A response of shock, surprise, frustration or anger indicates they find the behavior or preferences of the other person to be incorrect or wrong, which works to validate a person's own cultural preferences. This highlights the need for effective intercultural communication in the context of a multicultural team so its members have an affinity that supports an effective progress in its mission.

**Culture: Setting the Stage for Intercultural Communication**

The fact of being a member of society presupposes the effects of culture on a person. The way people understand life, what they hold as meaningful, and how it answers the questions they face defines their culture. It provides a foundation for understanding the world around them as well as giving guidance for daily events. This foundation is referred to as worldview which Whiteman defines as “the central governing set of concepts, presuppositions and values that a society lives by.”
Eugene Bunkowske designed an ingenious diagram to describe culture that is based on the structure of an onion. He describes culture as layered, with each layer informing the others originating from a profound inner core. Beliefs and values represent the levels where people begin to be aware of how they interact with the world around them. They are broad in scope, affecting how people define the context in which they decide what they do and what they plan to do as well as how they will go about it. Values are in effect limits for the people of a society which enables them to have a foundation from which to make choices and to give them stability and a sense of who they are within their society and culture.

Beliefs and values result in the outward, visual behaviors of individuals and groups. It is these behaviors that are most often seen by others and are the first things that others respond to, whether positively or negatively. People have molded their behavior to the requirements placed on them by their culture for generations. What is often not understood is that the behaviors are the product of the culture and worldview, rather than the source of such.

Silzer and Hong refer to a study by Mary Douglas in which it was found that there are two main recurring themes, Grid and Group, in a wide range of cultures. Silzer refers to Grid as “Structure” and Group as “Community.” Structure refers to “characteristics that differentiate individuals in a group.” Differences such as age, gender, ethnicity, job title and social class all shape behavior. “Community refers to similarities that reinforce group belonging and identity.” These opposing axes, moving from weak to strong, create four cultural types in which people interact. Each cultural type has a “cultural bias” made up of their chosen worldview and values. When people of different cultures come together, they invariably judge each other according to their own cultural framework. If approached in a positive manner, this meeting sets the stage for effective intercultural communication.

Leadership and Intercultural Communication: Helping Cultures to Connect

People bring their cultural background with them when they participate in multicultural teams. To be successful, it is imperative that the members move beyond their cultural preferences and seek to understand how their team members see and understand the world around them. This is even more important for the person or persons who lead the team.

The values held by leaders as well as members of the team are a major influence on their relationship. Culture is a major factor in the development of the individual as a person so it is not surprising that cultural background heavily influences leadership styles and behaviors.

Leadership involves influence, vision, and motivation to bring people together to focus on a common goal. Lingenfelter proposes that cultural differences on multicultural teams are a catalyst for conflict and disagreement. Therefore, a major responsibility of cross-cultural leadership is to help team members coming from different cultural backgrounds have a common vision and to build an environment of trust. Merely trying to reduce cross cultural tensions will not be enough to help people work together effectively. Procedures and practices that help change attitudes and dissipate apprehension, suspicion and doubt are needed. Trust is not built in a vacuum but requires intentional effort that incrementally builds understanding, appreciation and confidence. The leader must provide a vision of trust but it is the responsibility of the team as a whole to build a community of trust.

Hofstede identified five major elements of culture, all of which are embedded in people’s values and standards that affect intercultural communication and leadership. They are individualism-collectivism (individual versus community focus), uncertainty avoidance (risk versus threat focus), power distance (equality versus hierarchy focus), masculinity-femininity (dominance of male versus female values) and long term orientation (long-
standing versus short-term traditions and values). Other elements that also affect intercultural communication and leadership include context (verbal versus nonverbal focus) and cognitive style (holistic versus analytic focus). This information is invaluable to the leader that is working to communicate effectively with their team members. It also provides the team members with a tool to better understand their leaders and their colleagues and to understand themselves. Having this information and deciding to act on it are key steps in effective intercultural communication.

Cultural values and preferences play a part in whether a leader’s style and characteristics are accepted by team members. Contreras and Saenz divide leadership into two major categories, authoritarian or autocratic and participatory or democratic. In some cultures, the individual is the primary focus of leadership while in other cultures, leadership evokes the collective group. Both leadership styles are used effectively but can also be abused. Plueddemann warns that “leadership styles in every culture have the potential of reflecting good or evil in the heart of the leader.” A clash of cultures is imminent when the values held by a team member about leadership differ from those held by the leader. Correct attitudes built on trust and effective communication go a long way in these situations. Often these situations take place early in a team relationship when those foundations have not yet been built. Good leadership adjusts to the requirements of the team and the problems they face. It is imperative that leaders first recognize their cultural style of leadership and its inherent strengths and weaknesses, work to acquire skills in understanding the cultural background of team members and incorporate an effective communication model in their leadership style. This will allow them to respond appropriately in the context of a multicultural environment.

Multi-cultural teams and Intercultural Communication: Where Cultures Connect

As a result of different cultural contexts, it is obvious that there are differences in the way people see each other and how they respond to each other. It is inevitable that there will be conflicts in the arena of intercultural communication. This communication can be positive or negative. The experience of being a part of a multicultural team will begin positively and have a chance of long term success when people agree to serve on such a team, when they expect there will be cultural differences, when they have a positive attitude about working together, are willing to learn and practice skills that build trust and mutual understanding. The possibility of this happening is increased when they have received training about how to identify their own cultural preferences with their corresponding strengths and weaknesses as well as how they affect those of other cultures.

One key to multicultural team harmony and effectiveness is to create a new cultural paradigm for the group. Silzer advocates this through working together as a team to develop a team culture that reflects the image of God and creates a shalom community, while Lingenfelter proposes a team relationship that makes an intentional commitment built around a theological understanding that results in a covenant community. The new paradigm is not a collection of cultural pieces but rather a team based on shared values that flow from a commitment to a higher standard. The team then works together to define the policies and practices that reflect the core commitment.

Disagreement and Resolution: The Clash of Cultures

People have a tendency to recognize the cultural differences of the other members of the team and ignore the fact that they operate out of their own set of cultural preferences that appear strange to their colleagues. When this is the case, the
initial reactions of people as they evaluate the cultural practices of others are usually negative. They readily identify practices they deem as being weak, inconsistent, and thus incorrect. There may be an initial level of curiosity about how others do things but as people begin to work together, curiosity can quickly turn to frustration as people grow weary of working to accommodate the various cultural practices, especially if there are several cultural backgrounds represented in the group. Differences of values may become points of discord, and violence may erupt as people defend their way of life and their values and beliefs.

In the environment of a multicultural team, the effective leader will be sensitive to the cultural traditions of each team member and will work to help them identify with the larger group. Initially, there are differences that are very clear to all members such as language, greetings, eating practices and the formation of relationships. Differences about how people relate to seeming common things like time, crisis situations and job performance can create serious conflicts. This damages the level of trust in the group and causes division. When cultural views differ over deeper values such as religion, leadership and decision making styles or community responsibility, the division in relationships can become extremely deep and maybe impossible to resolve.

Other situations that threaten team unity and effectiveness are when team members from the same cultural background form alliances and insist on their cultural preferences at the expense of other members or when members of the group demonstrate feelings of superiority. In times of crisis, people revert to their default culture - that set of values that they learned as a child that bring them a sense of security and order when they sense anxiety and discord. This exacerbates the problem and can cause others to respond in the same way, effectively dividing the team and suppressing communication.

A team may try to accommodate each member in building a new team culture using parts from each culture represented on the team. This is an attempt to create unity and a sense of comfort for everyone involved. However, as teams evolve and members change, this results in an endless attempt to readjust and redefine team culture. This also creates frustration and breaks trust as team practices and policies are in a constant state of flux.

Problem resolution is directly related to communication and is a specific challenge in a multicultural group. Dialogue is one way to begin to find a balance between cultures but must be understood to include the intentional joint development of a new paradigm which will guide the relationship into the future. Using small group discussions and giving and receiving response during conversations are ways to make sure each member really understands what the other person is saying. Patiently waiting for others to express themselves in a language that is not their mother tongue or putting off a decision until everyone has been heard will help build trust. Being flexible in using various methods to resolve a conflict is important. For example, it may be necessary to use a third party as a mediator to resolve a conflict or it may be better to use a direct one on one approach.

Acknowledging the importance of other cultures and appreciating the cultural differences in a team and learning to capitalize on this diversity can bring vitality and strength to a team. Both the leader and the team members should be trained to use tools that achieve a high level of mutual trust with their colleagues. However, when training programs for leadership are created or implemented, the cultural background of the leader or manager should be taken into account in building an effective program that result in better overall leadership.

Decision Making: A Crossroads of Intercultural Communication

Understanding how decisions are made and what influences the method of decision making is an important consideration for multicultural teams. Social context and cultural background are key
factors in the formation of a person. The values and belief systems of parents are influenced by their context within a culture and are passed on to their children through parent-child interaction. Cultural values passed from one generation to another not only create certain expectations and strategies about solving problems, but also indicate what is not acceptable. The more risk that is involved in the decision, the more culture becomes a factor of influence. This has strong implications for multicultural teams where members come from diverse backgrounds, each with their own preference about how decisions are made.

Differences in decision making preferences present a challenge to team dynamics and specifically to the leader. Because of the ramifications for the person and the team, this challenge must be addressed appropriately. Referring to one of the axes of Mary Douglas’ cultural theory, Silzer maintains that “how decisions are made, where authority lies and who wins in conflict situations” help form Structure, or how a person is categorized within a society. Within the axis of Structure, there are two divergent types of decision making. One makes decisions according the rules of the systems through leaders entrusted with authority and with the expectation that the system is right (Strong Structure) while the other embraces individual decision making with authority belonging in the individual with the most power (Weak Structure). The need for effective intercultural communication is evident when people with such contrasting culturally preferred decision making styles, views of authority and ideas of conflict resolution, attempt to work together on a multicultural team.

Enayatil suggests that it is important for multicultural teams to have formal procedures for decision making. Consistent procedures improve the quality of how people communicate with each other and ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak equally, creating balance among members. However, there is a danger that defined procedures will promote a more task oriented structure that can be rigid and geared toward production so it is important to attend to the emotional and relational aspects of the team to maintain proper balance. For those interested in a democratic approach to decision making, the following reflective method is suggested:

1. Analysis of the causes and implications of the problem;
2. Consideration of the criteria for an ideal solution;
3. Proposition of a set of possible solutions;
4. Evaluation of the extent to which each proposal meets the criteria for an ideal solution; and
5. Choosing and implementing of the proposal that best meets the criteria.

Summary

The complexities of communication are magnified in multicultural team situations. Each member, including those in leadership, brings their cultural preferences with them to the team. Cultural differences can create discord among members or provide an opportunity to learn from each other. Therefore, understanding and participating in the exchange of cultural information through intercultural communication with those of other cultures is critical for positive team relationships and effective productivity as a group. Leadership and decision making are affected by cultural values and practices which require both leaders and team members to practice flexibility, patience and a willingness to adapt to new paradigms and actively participate in meaningful ways in the development of the team. Team members as well as leaders must strive to be positive in their interactions, work to build trust, acknowledge cultural influences on leadership and decision making styles, and learn new skills that will help them to build a team environment that will be satisfying and effective.

Bibliography


Plueddemann, James E. Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church.


**Endnotes**


9. Ibid., Kindle location 789.


13. Bunkowske defines the seven layers as Ultimate Allegiance - is the beating heart, the starting point, the trigger and grounding reality that gives basic direction, cohesion and structure to the underlying stories, mental mappings, meta-narratives and perspectives in a person’s worldview. Worldview - the organized arrangement, the managing perspective, the internal gyro at the center of human and societal reality. Worldview provides a mental map of what is understood to be real. Beliefs - mental evaluations and conclusions about the experiences of every day life on a scale of true to false. Values - mental evaluations and conclusions about the experiences of every day life on a scale of good to bad. Feelings - the emotional evaluations and conclusions about the experiences of every day life on a scale of, for instance calm to angry, happy to sad, and love to hate. Behaviors - what a person does. Artifact - the physical characteristics of a person, the things or objects that are connected with that person.


15. Ibid., p. 17.


20. Ibid., Kindle location 564.
22. Ibid., 61; Silzer, Biblical Multicultural Teams, Kindle Location 571.
28. Ibid., 8.
33. Silzer, Biblical Multicultural Teams, Kindle location 453.
34. Lingenfelter, Leading Cross-culturally, 74.
36. Lingenfelter, Leading Cross-culturally, 72.
37. Lahey et al., Communicating Across Cultures, 15.
44. Silzer, Biblical Multicultural Teams, Kindle location 618.
45. Ibid., Kindle location 624.
47. Ibid., 95.
48. Ibid., 95.
49. Ibid., 89.