

Module 8 - Multicultural Teams



In this module you will learn:

- The advantages and disadvantages of multicultural teams
- The skills needed to manage and lead diverse teams
- The characteristics of effective vs. ineffective teams

Module 8 Multicultural Teams and Their Leadership

Introduction

This week, we examine the nature of teams and explore the factors that lead to team success. Understanding the dynamics of team interactions and managing and leveraging those dynamics are important skills for leaders and managers. Consider the following: as groups form and work together, informal leaders arise, conflict increases, power struggles emerge, coalitions and alliances form, and differing levels of commitment to the group's goals have to be managed. In addition, varying ethical perspectives and values appear as decisions are made. These are but a few of the issues that you will have to manage to be an effective team leader.

At-a-Glance Definitions

- **Team:** An interdependent group of people who work collaboratively to achieve a common goal. The interdependency of team members requires trust, communication, and mutual support for each person's role on the team. Team members have a sense of identity as a group, and that sense of identity emerges from working together for a common purpose.
- **Homogenous team:** Members share a similar background that is likely to influence perceptions and values. People perceive, interpret, and evaluate ideas, plans, and decisions in like-minded ways.
- **Token team:** In token teams, except for one member, all come from the same or very similar backgrounds.

- **Bicultural team:** In bicultural teams, members represent two distinct cultures.
- **Multicultural team:** A work group that has three or more people with significantly different ethnic or country backgrounds. Multiculturalism is but one aspect of diversity. Team diversity is based on numerous factors such as age, experience, expertise, gender, perspectives, values, learning preferences, cognitive styles, and personality.

Compelling Situation

All professionals can expect to work in teams as members, and perhaps as team leaders, as they advance their careers. Today, more than one-third of US companies with 50 or more employees have 50 percent of employees working in problem-solving or self-managed teams.

Research Trends: What's Being Discovered Relative to the Advantages and Disadvantages of Diverse Multicultural Teams

Benefits of Workplace Diversity

An organization's success depends on its ability to embrace diversity and realize the benefits. Some of these benefits include:

- Organizations with a diverse workforce can generate a greater variety of solutions to problems by using the diverse talents and experiences of the workers.
- A diverse workforce allows companies to provide better service to a diverse customer base.
- Increased innovation and creative approaches to problem solving are possible because diverse teams resist conformity. By resisting conformity, they are not as prone to be victimized by groupthink.
- Diversity can lead to productive conflict, which ensures that all new ideas are thoroughly critiqued before they are implemented.

Challenges of Workplace Diversity

Workforce diversity presents its own set of challenges:

- **Communication:** Cultural and language barriers can negatively impact communications, resulting in confusion, misunderstandings, and frustration. Communication styles across cultures may differ. Some cultures promote a direct and confrontational style, while in Asian cultures, a direct style would be considered disrespectful.
- **Stereotyping and prejudices** can and do negatively affect working relations between people. We carry around ethnic, racial, gender, and even professional stereotypes, which can cause misunderstandings and hostility.
- **Factionalism:** Multicultural teams may break down into factions and cliques based on shared cultural values, and these factions may come into conflict with each other. If the conflict isn't managed well, then the team may lose sight of its goals and focus more energy on group relations than on output.

Managing diversity and multicultural teams requires a unique skill set on the part of managers. They should be aware of the following:

1. Global leaders need to be aware of their own biases and stereotypes. They need to understand how their cultural values affect their leadership style, decision-making, perceptions, and responses to a variety of situations and the expectations for their workforce. Biases can lower team morale, commitment, and productivity.
2. They need to appreciate individual differences and the insights that people can bring to a team because of their different life experiences and different perspectives.
3. They must recognize differences but focus on similarities between people.
4. They need to view people as individuals and not as members of a group to help avoid treating them as stereotypes.

5. Leaders need to develop knowledge and understanding of other cultures, their business norms, and their values, and find ways to appreciate the differences. By doing so, they can create greater trust, commitment, better employee relations, and greater esprit de corps.
6. They need to build communication skills to minimize cultural misunderstanding and misinterpretations, as well as develop an awareness that people from different cultures have different perspectives on personal space, touching, eye contact, and nonverbal gestures. Global leaders need to fully understand what these nonverbal behaviors are and the messages they represent.
7. Team leaders must have multiple strategies for being successful. They can employ a strategy where cultural differences are openly acknowledged and worked around, or they can try to change the team's makeup, set norms and guidelines for group interactions, or remove people from the team when the other strategies do not work.

There are indicators of when teams are working well together or not.

A Team Is Effective When...	A Team Needs to Increase Effectiveness When...
Goals/purpose is clearly defined; members are energized.	The team's goal/purpose appears vague; members hesitate, do not demonstrate buy-in/commitment.
Team members know/recognize expertise for tasks among team members and that expertise has been tied to team goals.	Expertise and relevant experiences of team members is not shared.
Members understand/discuss individual roles within team interactions for getting results.	Specific responsibilities for producing task results or for managing interactions seem confusing or unknown to team members.
Team members have defined norms or "ground rules" for communicating plans problems, solutions, and schedule.	Documents of team communication "ground rules" are not easily available or transparent.
Each member has appropriate communication skills and tools (including technology) to ensure	Limited/no knowledge of whether or not team members can use available collaboration tools (i.e., technology for

collaboration among team members.	developing a collaborative document/plan, or personal skills for advancing interaction, asking open-ended questions, providing examples and stories relevant to sharing ideas, insights, and information).
Applies critical thinking and devil's advocacy to ask questions or review almost-final results to avoid groupthink (too much cohesion).	Close to deadline for deliverables, overlooks or ignores review for quality; engages in groupthink as time/deadlines become top priority.
Achieves goals, and/or negotiates revised or new goals using external resources.	Fails to achieve purpose or goals; cannot gain access to needed resources.
<i>Source:</i> Adler (2008) and research studies of diversity and team performance, 2004-2012, Business Source Premier database	

Summary

The factors of an effective team become more important in a multicultural diverse team. Teamwork and diversity/multiculturalism factors are accepted conditions for today's managers. To manage well, you must understand how to develop teams that respect and use multicultures. Those efforts will require ongoing learning.