



July 15, 2009

Reaching Consensus: Bridging Cultural Differences

by Donny Ebenstein

Our company recently merged with an overseas company, resulting in a consolidation of our human resources department. As a senior HR manager, I now am responsible for managing staff and serving internal clients located in China, India, and Singapore, as well as across the U.S. Any advice on managing across different cultures?

The ability to work across different cultures is an increasingly important part of corporate life. You are wise to pay attention to the challenge of managing people who are both physically distant and culturally diverse. Regardless of what culture one comes from, or which new cultures one interacts with, there are two main pitfalls people should keep in mind.

First, because we are steeped in our own culture, it's often hard for us to identify when our own cultural assumptions may be shaping how we act. For example, as a manager you may tell your direct reports they should feel free to disagree with you or confront you when they don't think you made the best decision. While that may be natural and comfortable in the U.S., there are many cultures in the world where confronting one's manager is perceived as disloyal or disrespectful. And in those cultures, don't be surprised if you find your direct reports avoiding an overt disagreement with you. You may not realize how your assumptions differ from those of your reports, which may lead you to blame them as individuals, rather than to recognize culture as the culprit.

The best advice is to be explicit about cultural issues. Explain your own style and preferences, and ask about theirs. For example, try something like, "I would like to invite you to confront me if you disagree. I recognize my style is very American, and I know that may make some of you uncomfortable. Is there another way for us to communicate or interact that you would find more comfortable?"

You also should be candid about when you don't understand your reports' behavior. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and to voice your concern that perhaps something cultural is causing the gap between your expectations and theirs.

The second pitfall is that we often use our own culture as the standard for how things should be done. Put another way, the issue is seeing our own culture as "right" and their culture as "wrong." For example, the levels of formality differ from country to country. In the U.S., the casual style of referring to colleagues both junior and senior by their first names is common. Therefore, hearing someone calling people by titles rather than by first names, or seeing someone defer to a colleague out of respect for his or her age, may seem strange and inconsistent with creating a friendly work environment. This type of attitude, which comes from using one's own culture as the mark of what is legitimate, inevitably leaks out and comes across as condescending.

The best way to shed your stance of superiority is to learn more about the other cultures. Adopt an attitude of curiosity. You can learn through many different media. Read books. Find articles that describe the cultures within which you work. Engage your colleagues in honest conversations about how things work in their culture. Above all, set aside judgment. Accepting that your way isn't objectively best for everyone can go a long way

towards improving communication with your colleagues across the globe. Indeed, sometimes just showing interest and respect is enough to spark a productive dialogue about the challenges facing both you and your new reports as you begin working together.

Remember, you don't have to completely bridge the cultural gap in order to work together successfully. It's alright for you to feel more comfortable with your way and for them to feel more comfortable with theirs. By learning more about their approach, and by being explicit about your own assumptions, you may be able to generate a new style that works for everyone involved.

At the end of the day, being aware of culture as a factor in creating conflict, being explicit about its role within your relationships with colleagues, and being non-judgmental about cultural assumptions will help you build better relationships with your reports. That, in turn, will increase efficiency, aid retention of staff, and encourage your reports to contact you when any difficulties arise.

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