

## ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ

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### **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERCULTURAL AND INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES IN MULTICULTURAL PROFESSIONAL TEAMS<sup>1</sup>**

*The primary challenge of explaining intercultural competence to others is describing its complexity to different readers in a straightforward order and providing them with the foundational concepts, important theory, and rich experiential and factual details. The article explains intercultural competence relevance to contemporary organizations, and highlights its perceptual nature. Further, describes how intercultural competence is viewed in the context of multicultural teams, and outlines the basis for researching and practicing intercultural competence.*

**Keywords:** culture, society, globalization, socialization, intercultural dialogue, intercultural differences, team, personality.

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### **ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТЬ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНЫХ И МЕЖЛИЧНОСТНЫХ ПРОЦЕССОВ В МНОГОКУЛЬТУРНЫХ ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНЫХ КОМАНДАХ**

*Основная задача объяснения межкультурной компетенции – описать ее сложность различным читателям в прямом порядке и предоставить им базовые концепции, важную теорию и богатые экспериментальные и фактические детали. В статье объясняется актуальность межкультурной компетенции для современных организаций и подчеркивается ее перцептивная*

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<sup>1</sup>Статья публикуется в авторской редакции.

*природа. Описывається, як міжкультурна компетентність розглядається в контексті мультикультурних команд, і излагаються основи для дослідження і практики міжкультурної компетентності.*

**Ключевые слова:** культура, общество, глобализация, социализация, межкультурный диалог, межкультурные различия, команда, личность.

**Introduction.** Ray and Bronstein (1995) argue that a link exists between the team development process and anthropological roots of human history. They view the origin of teams as social arrangements that provide security and the feeling of belonging, especially before the industrial age and during hunter-and-gatherer communal living. While the roots of individualism are only several hundred years old, the origin of collectivism and interdependence dates back millions of years [16]. Thus, a basic drive for survival and emotional security through cooperation is fundamental to human interaction. This drive toward group formation explains why the work groups tend to be a more effective way to organize some if not all activities in organizations at the present time.

A group can be defined as three or more individuals involved in ongoing interaction with each other and following shared rules of conduct in an attempt to reach a common goal. A team is a special kind of group with a strong sense of collective identity. Teams consist of people with specialized expertise who perceive themselves as an operating unit more than as members of groups. While the terms “a small group,” “a group,” and “a team” are used interchangeably with an underlying assumption that there are more similarities than differences among these terms, in this article the term “team” will be used to underline a special sense of collectivity and cohesiveness.

Teamwork has become a common way of organizing in the contemporary workplace. In the professional world, groups are formed for such reasons as to share workloads, build social networks, gain support from organizational stakeholders and to transfer experience from more experienced members of an organization to less experienced. Groups develop constitutive and regulative rules that group members understand and follow when they interact with each other [14]. Group rules increase productivity and effectiveness of a group’s

performance and help group members to manage conflict situations.

The internationalization of business has resulted in the creation of multicultural teams. This shift toward facilitating cooperation and more extensive intra-industry communication was necessary for several reasons. For example, functioning in the global business environment is increasingly competitive and interdependent. The complex problems of the global marketplace require new ways of thinking and greater understanding of local and global customers. Global customer satisfaction calls for effective functioning of geographically dispersed, culturally mixed work teams. Networked organizations, team-based structures, global webs, cells, and virtual teams are becoming common additions to traditional hierarchical organizations, and many multinational companies rely heavily on multicultural teams to perform work-related activities.

**Main part.** Experts (Townsend, DeMarie, Hendrickson, Marquardt, Horvath) define multicultural teams as task-oriented groups consisting of people of different nationalities and cultures. High-performance multicultural teams are the multicultural teams that meet characteristics of high-performance teams and are composed of people from different nationalities or cultures. Mobilizing the energy and synergy of managers from various cultures to work as a team can lead to multiple perspectives and more creative approaches to problems and challenges [6]. One of the most notable benefits of multicultural teams is that they can provide companies with significant gains in productivity.

Effective multicultural teams are central to future global competitiveness, workforce motivation and management. As evidence, consider the following examples: Whirlpool International’s management committee is made up of six people from six nations; IMB has five nationalities represented among its highest

ranking officers and three among its outside directors; four nationalities are represented on Unilever's board and three different nationalities are represented on the board of Shell Oil. In addition, management at Ford and Citicorp, two large multinational corporations, believes that competing in a global economy requires a company to establish multicultural teams in order to decrease redundant operations across countries. Instead of having Europeans at work in Europe designing a product for the European market and Americans at work in North America designing a product for the North American market, Ford uses multinational teams to design products for a global market, taking advantage of economies of scale. Following this belief in the global economy as a way to maximize efficiency, a typical new product development team at Ford consists of individuals from the host country, the parent company, and countries where the product will be marketed.

The effectiveness of intercultural and interpersonal processes in multicultural work teams has become a central issue of contemporary management research (Adler, Shenkar & Zeira). Many ineffective multicultural teams drain resources rather than improve efficiency and generate success. Cultural differences among team members can cause many difficulties, including conflict, misunderstanding, and poor performance. The effectiveness of intercultural and interpersonal processes in multicultural professional teams has become a crucial question for multinational and global organizations. Multicultural teams operating across time and distance are destined to have some difficulties. According to Rhinesmith, "figuring out the complexity of global operations is a little like solving a crossword puzzle: you look for clues and sometimes run into blind alleys" [15, p.88]. Multicultural teams can be both more effective and less effective than monocultural teams depending on the successful implementation of suited team-building measures and team leadership development [9]. The most common challenges of multicultural teams are cultural imperialism, context-focused thinking, cultural, communication, linguistic, and communication competence differences.

1. Cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is a common mistake that people make when assuming that everyone thinks in a similar way.

In addition to acknowledging differences in cultural norms, one must understand how cultural norms affect a global team's dynamics. The various cultures of team members trigger perceptions, influence interactions, and affect team performance. The nature of communication and decision making differs depending on cultural characteristics and the value emphasis of a certain culture. For example, in a low-context culture where meaning is expressed explicitly and more clearly, factual communication is necessary to arrive at a decision than in a high-context society. While high-context cultures rely heavily on restricted codes, contextual clues, and implicit meaning, the communication in low-context cultures is more elaborate, explicit, demonstrative, and straightforward. In the USA, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Germany—low-context cultures—most of the information conveyed in communication is embedded in words. In contrast to low-context cultures, communication meaning in Asia, Latin America, and countries of the former Soviet Union extends far beyond the words. Ignoring these differences by assuming that all members of a group equally understand and communicate messages in similar ways can therefore be extremely detrimental to high-quality and efficient decision-making.

2. Context-focused thinking. Context-focused or location-centric thinking involves communicating with team members around the world based on the central command view from one corporate office, dictating policy elsewhere in the world. For example, a global team's planning sessions can be scheduled on Friday morning in the USA, which is a suitable time for a meeting in the USA. However, scheduling a meeting for Friday morning in the USA when half of a team's members are in Australia would require those members to be present for a meeting on Saturday morning. Similar problems related to location-centered thinking escalated in the 1990s with a significant increase in the number of mergers, acquisitions, and global joint ventures. Structural rearrangements that crossed external boundaries of nations often produced culture clash. When Pharmacia, a Sweden-based drug company with a significant presence in Italy and Upjohn, a US-based company, merged in 1995, clear communication between employees based in the three national

cultures proved difficult. The Pharmacia/Upjohn management had to place corporate headquarters in London and maintain business centers in Michigan, Stockholm, and Milan to reduce location-central thinking and nationalistic tendencies of employees.

3. Cultural differences. Another challenge of multicultural teams is that the values, beliefs, and behaviors of each member of a multicultural professional team are different. For example, while Americans are accustomed to direct business communication that includes specific actions to be acted upon, German counterparts prefer presenting a detailed rationale before talking about specific actions. Members of multicultural professional teams need to learn about one another's cultural differences because it "improves communication by reducing perceptual distortion and the tendency to rely on stereotypes" [12, p.16]. To acknowledge these communication and cultural differences, global teams have to establish very clear norms about communication and business interaction.

4. Communication differences. An analysis of communication differences across cultures determined that "substantial differences in communication orientation exist among the countries of the world" [11, p.76]. Since "people unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming," communication patterns differ among the culturally diverse team members [8, p.10]. While the communication patterns in the individualistic and assertive cultures is often competitive, direct and aimed at making a point, communication in collectivistic and unobtrusive cultures is usually cooperative and conciliatory. For example, in a collectivistic culture, such as Belarus, communication tends to have a higher degree of emotion and personality as opposed to the climate of an individualistic culture with its high degree of objectivity.

Communication differences are even stronger due to a long rhetorical tradition in the Western world, where a primary function of communication has been to express ideas as "clearly, logically and persuasively as possible" [7, p.140]. Some cultures value simplicity and straightforwardness, favoring the "tell-it-like-it-is" or "what you see is what you get" approach in communication. Other cultures have always "attributed life's events to some dark set of conspiratorial forces that needs to be unraveled from an exceedingly complex explanation of

how the world works" [1, p.87]. Therefore, without proper training, team members from different cultures might easily misunderstand each other, even when speaking the same language.

5. Linguistic differences. Language is not merely a tool for delivering a message. Language is a reflection of national character, culture, and national philosophy [4]. People from different countries use their language and speech in different ways. Differences in speech and language styles bring mis-understandings and confusion to attempts to interpret messages. Whereas to the French, their language is a supreme instrument for analytical thought and logical expression, to the Belarussians language is a great emotional resonator and repository of everything that can be expressed about the human condition (Holden, Cooper, Carr, Lewis). Among the numerous features of the Belarussian and Russian language are its capacity to express all knowledge accumulated by mankind in every field of endeavor and its semantic universality and, therefore, its ability to describe human life in its entirety. For example, the Russian word for "dad" is "papa" but it comes in at least 33 different forms, each of which signifies a distinctive level of affection, playfulness, and intimacy. In addition, potential problems can occur due to the linguistic differences when translation is needed in a business setting. For example, the Japanese president of Mazda Motors Corporation estimated that 20 % of the meaning communicated was lost between him and his interpreter during his meetings with American representatives of Ford Motor Company. Another 20 % of the meaning was lost between the interpreter and American representatives.

6. Communication competence differences. Research on communication behavior reveals that the communication competence of an individual is related to willingness to communicate, communication apprehension and communication assertiveness [5]. For example, communication competence, communication apprehension, and willingness to communicate of people from Eastern Europe differ significantly from people in the USA and other Western countries. For instance, a study of students at Moscow State University in Russia showed that the overall willingness to communicate score for Russians indicated a

lower willingness to engage in communication than the comparative countries, including the USA. Russian students are less willing to initiate communication with groups, dyads, strangers and friends, ranking lowest among comparable countries. The mean communication apprehension score for Russians was identical to Finland: Russians reported the second highest introversion score while the USA reported the lowest introversion. Russian students perceived themselves as lower on communication competence than most other groups, while indicating they are most competent when communicating with friends. Compared with the USA, Russians reported lower assertiveness and higher responsiveness [3].

Marquardt and Horvath (2001) further explored the topic of potential challenges of multicultural teams naming managing cultural diversity, cultural differences, and intercultural conflicts among some of the most common challenges. Cultural differences among team members can cause conflict, misunderstanding, and poor performance. Five of the most typical challenges are: managing cultural diversity, differences and conflicts; handling geographic distances, dispersion and despair; dealing with coordination and control issues; maintaining communication richness and developing and maintaining team cohesiveness [10].

7. Managing cultural diversity, differences, and conflicts. Diverse culture orientations of multicultural team members cause members to see business tasks differently. These cultural differences can result in potential problems due to miscommunication, conflict, and arguments, influencing members to participate in decision making and other group activities differently. For example, the direct cultures, such as the USA, many Western European countries and New Zealand, use direct and explicit negotiating and conflict management strategies. On the contrary, many Eastern European and Asian cultures choose more circuitous and indirect strategies to convey disagreement or criticism.

8. Handling geographic distances, dispersion and despair. Geographic distance, a condition in which many multicultural teams operate, can influence the communication and interaction processes among team members. Frequently, it is difficult to establish the necessary trust for effective teamwork as limited face-to-face interaction make peoples' interaction more

reserved and constrained. In addition, geographic distance limits an understanding of the decision-making styles of team members, which in turn affect team coordination and control [1]. Reduced communication context richness makes even further limiting effect on working performance of team members from high-context cultures who rely heavily on nonverbal communication. A possibility of out-of-sight, out-of-mind syndrome, groupthink and half-finished tasks exists in distantly dispersed multicultural teams.

9. Dealing with coordination and control issues. Multicultural teams also provide more room for coordination and control difficulties because of cultural, communication, and linguistic differences. The complexity of coordinating tasks, the team size, the leadership and management styles that team members are accustomed to in their original culture are some of the factors that influence coordination and control in multicultural teams.

10. Maintaining communication richness. Low-context cultures favor factual and informative communication; in turn, high-context cultures rely on experience sharing, rituals, and nonverbal information exchange. In multicultural teams, problems of establishing effective and appropriate information exchange can occur due to the difference of team members in the low-context vs. high-context continuum. Low-context cultures can be comfortable with electronic mail, facsimile, voice mail, and electronic chat; high-context cultures prefer face-to-face and virtual reality meetings or video-conferencing [13]. Therefore, distantly dispersed multicultural teams can face extra pressures of maintaining the necessary richness of communication to compensate for a lack of face-to-face communication and narrow the cultural distance gap.

11. Developing and maintaining cohesiveness. Building and retaining cohesive teams is always a challenge. Adding cross-cultural differences and the burdens of distance, which are present in multicultural teams, might result in teams losing their teamness—"the synergistic effect that makes it successful as a cohesive unit" [2, p. 42]. Different cultures place different values on team membership, trust and commitment to team tasks. In addition, the size and often distant nature of team member

composition further impacts team development and team maintenance.

Managers from different cultures are likely to interpret and respond differently to the same strategic issues or team tasks because they have distinct perceptions of environmental opportunities and threats and internal strengths and weaknesses. For example, when members of a multicultural team differ significantly on the power distance cultural dimension, difficulties are likely to occur in developing communication and leadership patterns acceptable to the entire multicultural team. Multicultural teams whose members differ in individualism and collectivism culture orientation are likely to have challenges developing team roles and norms because of different senses of organizational and individual responsibility. These multicultural teams could face impediments in developing team norms because of differing expectations of cooperation, friendliness and group-versus-individual decision making.

**Conclusion.** Understanding common challenges of multicultural teams and maximizing their potential advantages can help multicultural teams to deal productively with cultural diversity and to increase team performance. Managers of multinational organizations use a number of preparatory measures (team composition, clearly defined goals, transparent structures, and strong leadership) and accompanied measures (team building, effective communication, team norms, and team members' roles) to address common challenges and develop multicultural teams' positive potential (Ilgen, Major, Hollenbeck, & Segoe; Maznevski & Peterson; Miliken & Martins; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright). All of these measures demand high intercultural competence: team members must be able to communicate and listen effectively, change perspectives, tolerate ambiguity, and deal with varying action adequately.

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