

Beware of stereotypes when working cross-culturally

As cross-cultural collaborations become the norm for global organizations, more thought needs to be put into overcoming the downsides of distance working.

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Working with colleagues from other countries is a fact of modern life. But working well with colleagues from other countries is not always easy.

A [study](#) by IESE's [Carlos Rodriguez-Lluesma](#) and Paul M. Leonardi of Northwestern University, published in *Communication Monographs*, finds that even among professional peers working together on a common project, stereotypes and pecking orders persist, leading to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns that threaten the viability of the collaboration.

Perceived pecking order & stereotypes

The authors focused on a U.S.-based automaker that had a team of U.S., Mexican and Indian engineers working together on product development.

The Mexican engineers spoke openly about how they saw the pecking order: U.S. engineers at the top, working in the U.S. central office; and Indian engineers at the bottom, working in the automaker's Indian facility.

The U.S. engineers were thought of as the inventors, who worked independently and did not necessarily follow the rules.

The Mexican engineers believed the others regarded them as "a little bit lazy," "not smart

enough to come up with new ways of doing things," and likely to "spend all day talking."

Reverse psychology backfires

Because the Mexican engineers held these perceptions, they repeatedly did something that surprised the authors: They deliberately misled their U.S. counterparts about how they worked, in order to try to subvert the stereotype they thought the U.S. engineers held about them, as well as to conform to the image of the rule-bending, out-of-the-box inventor, which was what they believed their U.S. colleagues wanted.

Ironically, the Mexican engineers actually worked according to the standard procedure mandated by the company, yet they persisted in misrepresenting it, thinking it would make them look better in the other's eyes.

Their reverse psychology backfired, as this quote by a U.S. engineer attests: "Mexican engineers are pretty good... but they still have some problems. Like they're always trying to come up with new procedures for things, and they never spend time talking with their colleagues who are more experienced, which they should do -- like asking questions -- because there is some real expertise they're missing out on down there."

Consequently, the U.S. engineers grew wary of working with the Mexican engineers -- simply because they had gotten the wrong end of the stick.

Do as I say, not as I do

In contrast, when working with their Indian counterparts, the Mexican engineers actively worked in the other direction.

"Over there in India they're trying to invent new ways of doing things and not following procedures. They're kind of individualistic. We've got to try to fix that and get them to follow standard work, so they can keep improving," said a Mexican engineer.

Because the Mexican engineers regarded the Indian engineers as lower status, they seemed to feel responsible for teaching them how to improve. They ended up working together more effectively, and their results were more positive for the company.

Global communication challenges

The engineers in Mexico, India and the United States relied on e-mail, phone calls, Internet

data conferencing and instant messaging. In the absence of face-to-face time, their cultural stereotypes were never replaced with individual relationships, much less friendships.

In fact, this may have actually contributed to them falling back on stereotypes to construct information and storylines where none existed.

As such, the authors recommend that managers of multinational companies "make time and find a budget for global communication partners to visit each other's workplaces occasionally, so that they learn how they work and, consequently, refrain from stereotyping based on lack of knowledge."

Otherwise, managers may be as surprised as the authors to find competent workers lying about good, productive work habits in order to look better in someone else's eyes.

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