

3 tips to help multicultural teams succeed

As business becomes more globalized, multicultural working groups are on the rise. Tips for boosting performance of culturally diverse teams.



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International collaboration can be difficult, as colleagues must cross time zones, language barriers and cultural divides. Just ask those who were betting on the DaimlerChrysler megamerger. The union ultimately failed, with many blaming the two companies' cultural

discord. (For example, see ["Keys to Cross-Border Mergers in the Auto Industry."](#))

How can companies cultivate effective collaboration across cultural divides? [Yih-Teen Lee](#) of IESE and Minna Paunova of Copenhagen Business School look to the self-managed multicultural team. This working unit is made up of people from different cultures who are responsible for executing a team task. Especially when engaging with knowledge work, these teams' larger collective sets of skills and viewpoints foster creativity. What's more, their wider range of capabilities allow them "to serve a variety of client needs across space and time," the authors explain.

So how do they work? And how do they work *best*? Lee and Paunova's study points to very practical tips for working groups to thrive. The short answer is: training makes a difference.

The longer answer is, you don't need to have a Brazilian mom and an Indian dad with a Swiss education to contribute positively to multicultural teams' success. In their study of 36 multinational teams (made up of over 250 MBA students from over 40 countries), they find that what's really critical is fostering collective global leadership — and having a team-learning orientation is a way to get there.

Learning to know you better

In their study, the authors predicted that multicultural teams would be positively influenced by a "learning orientation." Learning-oriented individuals aren't afraid of failure and are eager to try new things. (In contrast, those who have a "performance orientation" are more eager to demonstrate their competence in current tasks.)

Anyone who has lived abroad can tell you that adapting to a different culture is a social learning process. The same is true in multicultural work environments. On a team level, the study confirmed that learning orientation can drive higher performance, efficacy, and commitment, as well as improved team dynamics.

(At the same time, Lee and Paunova found that when team members are already willing to put group goals above their own individual glory, *learning* to be open is less important.)

Managing for the leaderless?

For success, recent scholarship recommends that global leadership be distributed across multiple team members. This implies that team members are open to both offer and receive guidance from all other team members, regardless of their culture or nationality.

When it works well, collective global leadership can boost team performance by driving greater effort and efficiency, as the present study confirmed for its MBA teams. Furthermore, shared responsibility improves the intra-team environment, allowing happier and more comfortable members to deliver improved results.

Three tips to boost team performance

So, is "learning orientation" a fixed trait, or can it be developed? The latter, say the authors, who offer three concrete tips to boost learning orientation, and thus collective leadership and performance, in multicultural teams:

1. **Hire learning-oriented team members.** The authors note that "learning orientation not only makes individual team members more leader-like, but also contributes to their effective participation in the global leadership process."
2. **Develop existing employees' learning orientation.** Implement "seminars and training tools designed to show that skills can be learned and that mistakes are a natural step in the learning process."
3. **Coach employees to adapt to multicultural teams.** Organizational programs can teach people to feel safer, identify with their multicultural team, and to be more trusting of team members from other cultures.

In short, Lee and Paunova find that multicultural teams perform best when they have collective global leadership, supported by a positive team environment. To get there, a key input is learning orientation, which can be acquired.

Methodology, very briefly

Data was collected from more than 250 MBA students working in 36 culturally diverse teams at a European business school over one academic year. On average, the teams had eight members from seven different countries — and there were no formally assigned leaders. Over the course of nine months, they were periodically graded on team assignments. They were also surveyed and otherwise assessed for their teamwork, dynamics and performance by the researchers and by an independent evaluator who did not know the study's hypotheses.

More info

["Cultural Competence: Why It Matters and How You Can Acquire It."](#)

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