

Chapter 10

Multicultural Teams—Some Considerations for Present and Future

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I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination...
—Albert Einstein

The previous chapters provided a comprehension discussion of theory and practice of multicultural teams. Our aim was to provide a bridge between emerging theory and practice-based knowledge in intellectually challenging and practically engaging and useful ways. It is not necessary to attempt a meta-summary of our previous discussions. However, it is important and useful to offer some overall questions and considerations as the readers proceed with their thinking and practice of multicultural teams.

Levels of Analysis

In this book we looked at multicultural behavioral dynamics at the team level. However, a multicultural team's effectiveness may be impacted by variables or dynamics at higher levels, as noted in the Multicultural Team Effectiveness Model in Chapter 1. Therefore it is extremely important that as managers, leaders, and members of teams we effectively diagnose and intervene at the appropriate organizational level. Consider the following example. A new monitoring and reporting system is introduced for project management in an international organization. After the first year of using this system the organization is receiving complaints that the data and information reported by some of the teams is incomplete and inaccurate in some cases. It is possible that these teams are not effective in performing one of their important tasks. However, it is also possible that some of these teams did not receive adequate training and guidance. Another possibility is that the information available is insufficient. Only careful attention to levels of analysis would reveal the level at which the problem may be occurring and identification of appropriate solutions.

Organizational Commitment

A number of chapters in the book make a case for the importance, need, and advantages of multicultural teams. The notion of teamwork and its usefulness for contemporary organizations is fully embraced today. We have all heard the question “Are you a team player?” as part of an interviewing process. While the commitment to supporting multicultural teams is often there in organizational settings, this commitment is incomplete in many cases as it is not supported through organizational systems and structure. I would like to highlight some of these systems as examples. While many organizations may encourage teamwork, they continue to evaluate and reward people based on individual performance and achievement. If we look at organizational performance management and compensation systems, with very few exceptions, these systems are geared towards individuals and not teams and teamwork. Effectiveness and sustainability of multicultural teams depend on introducing and maintaining organizational systems that support these teams. Similarly, creation and maintenance of organizational culture that promotes and reinforces teamwork is extremely important in encouraging and maintaining effective multicultural teams.

Difficult Choices and Decisions

Throughout the book we have employed and explained ideas and approaches that are inclusive and devoted to developing and capitalizing the best of human potential, with special attention to multicultural settings. However, there may be some situations where individual members do not perform and should be held accountable and in other cases more difficult decisions may be necessary when desired and expected performance goals are not met. Sometimes these difficult decisions have to be made and we should be prepared to make them fairly and effectively. Brett, J., Behfar, K. and Kem, M. et al. (2006) offer four broad approaches to manage such and other major challenges faced in multicultural teams. These are adaptation, structural interventions, managerial interventions, and exit. Adaptation refers to consciously addressing and working with cultural differences; structural interventions refer to adjusting the team design such as adding team members; managerial interventions which include mechanisms such as developing and following team norms; and exit strategies include removing and replacing team members when other interventions do not work.

Learning to Working Effectively in Multicultural Teams

We feel that that this book contains a comprehensive set of knowledge and skills related to working in multicultural teams effectively. These provide a good blend of intellectually stimulating conceptual frameworks and highly applied tools and

instruments to understand and manage the complexities of working in multicultural teams. Developing individual effectiveness in multicultural team settings occurs not only through acquiring the relevant knowledge but in practicing and testing it. In the opening pages of this book we argued that we see multicultural teamwork as a discipline. Developing the mastery to understand and work effectively in this discipline requires continuous personal investment over a period of time. Central to developing this mastery is openness to learning, taking some risks, and on-going commitment to personal and professional development.

The Future

We see the future of multicultural teams characterized by exciting challenges and possibilities. Throughout the book we noted the trends and challenges around working virtually across cultures. In the future we anticipate that virtual multicultural teams will continue to increase. This presents a dilemma. This trend is bringing individuals closer when working in teams across cultures in terms of speed and efficiency of communication. However, these new work arrangements present challenges in terms of lack of personal connections and psychological distance among team members.

It is increasing the distance between individuals as more and more people are in contact with each other with increasing frequency, with little or no face-to-face contact. At the same time, working virtually is decreasing the distance because our technology infrastructure allows communicating across cultures with speed and efficiency unprecedented even in the last 10 years. As this trend further unfolds, it will continue to bring opportunities and challenges for virtual multicultural teams.

The 2004 Human Development Report, titled “Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World”, advocates for identifying just and robust ways of working with multicultural societies around the world. The report draws special attention to the large immigration populations in Western Europe and the USA and the importance of integrating these populations into these societies. The increasing globalization of businesses, international development, and closer cooperation in the humanitarian sectors will continue to make our organizational environment more multicultural. The implications of these trends are clear—we need professionals who are competent to work in multicultural teams and organizations across a variety of sectors.

References

- Brett, J., Behfar, K. and Kern, M. (2006). Managing Multicultural Teams. *Harvard Business Review* 84(11), 84–91.
- Human Development Report (2004): Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World. New York: United Nations Development Program.