

Study examines thoughts and feelings that foster collaboration across cultures

September 12 2012

The musician Paul Simon came to fame collaborating with his childhood friend Art Garfunkel, yet launched another chapter with his Graceland album, collaborating with musicians from Soweto. Ratan Tata made his name expanding his family's firms in India, yet in recent decades has reached even greater success helping foreign firms such as Daewoo and Jaguar find new markets.

Whether artists, entrepreneurs, or executives, some individuals are especially able to bridge cultural gaps and leverage foreign ideas and opportunities. Why can some people collaborate creatively all around the world while others succeed only with people quite similar to themselves? Are there [psychological characteristics](#) that distinguish global collaborators? Do they form different kinds of relationships?

New research by Michael Morris, the Chavkin-Chang Professor of Leadership at Columbia Business School, finds that [mindfulness](#) about cultural assumptions is a key driver. People who are habitually aware of their cultural frameworks tend to develop more affectively trusting relationships with people from other cultures, opening the free flow of ideas that is intrinsic to creative collaboration. The paper, published in *Organizational Behavior and [Human Decision Processes](#)*, is led by former Columbia Business School doctoral student Roy Y.J. Chua (currently an assistant professor at Harvard Business School) and co-authored by current Columbia Business School doctoral student Shira Mor.

The globalization of business is increasingly creating demand for managers adept at working creatively with people from diverse backgrounds. Researchers have drawn attention to individual differences in cultural metacognition, the proclivity to reflect on and fine-tune one's cultural assumptions when interacting with others. In three studies using different ways of measuring cross-cultural collaboration, Morris's research team found that success can be predicted from an individual's cultural metacognition score, assessed with a survey inventory beforehand.

The first study asked business executives for lists of people from other cultures with whom they have worked over the course of their careers. The researchers then tracked down these associates and surveyed them about many aspects of the executive's management style, including the executive's success in collaborating creatively across cultural lines. These scores of intercultural collaboration success (from the vantage of individuals from different cultures) could be predicted by an executive's cultural metacognition score even when personality and other standard individual differences were controlled.

The second study used a social network survey. Managers were asked to name up to 20 contacts with whom they interact frequently in their work. The computer-driven survey then presented questions about each contact, including the extent to which the contact is source of new ideas—a marker of creative collaboration. The final question of the survey focused on the cultural background of each contact, which allowed the researchers to code each contact as same-culture or different-culture. As expected, the respondents' cultural metacognition scores predicted the extent of collaborative communication in their cross-cultural ties, and not in their same-cultural ties.

Another set of questions in this network survey concerned two kinds of trust that people experience in working relationships. Trust from the

heart, a feeling akin to rapport, is known as affective trust. Trust from the head, an evidence-based judgment of another's reliability and competence, is known as cognitive trust. Results showed that the effect of cultural metacognition on collaborative communication in cross-cultural ties was due to higher affective trust, not cognitive trust. In other words, managers low in cultural awareness had a deficit of affective trust in their intercultural ties that predicted the shortfall in their collaborative communications. Lack of mindfulness about their cultural assumptions, it seems, led to relationships lacking the emotional-level trust that begets open sharing of new ideas.

The third study was a laboratory experiment that simulated a creative design task. Students were paired with a design partner from a different cultural background. They were given a set of food ingredients from which they were asked to invent a novel chicken dish for a restaurant. Half of the pairs were assigned to talk informally before the design challenge whereas the other half were sent into it without getting acquainted. Results showed that the pairs who were higher in cultural metacognition succeeded in collaboratively designing dishes that were rated favorably by professional chefs serving as expert judges. These pairs also shared more ideas in their conversation and gave each other higher ratings as collaborators. This effect held in the acquainted condition, where the critical mechanism of trust development could take place, but not in the non-acquainted condition. To summarize, the evidence suggests a causal chain from the individual characteristic of cultural metacognition to the development of greater affective trust in interactions with people from other cultures, resulting in a greater ability to work together creatively.

One key insight from this research is that having a diverse professional network is not enough. For many executives, the creative potential in their cross-cultural relationships goes unrealized, because these relationships lack the trust that fosters open sharing of ideas. Another

insight is that mindfulness on one side of an interaction can suffice. In the final study, pairs succeeded as long as one of the two partners had high cultural metacognition and was therefore able to bridge the cultural gap in the interaction.

Fortunately, cultural [metacognition](#) is a social intelligence capability that can be developed. One way is through taking on assignments in other countries and actively comparing notes with others to gain a richer sense of how cultural lenses shape perceptions. The research suggests that such an effort should pay off in two ways: closer relationships with associates from different backgrounds, and more success in collaborating on innovative deals or ideas.

Provided by Columbia Business School

Citation: Study examines thoughts and feelings that foster collaboration across cultures (2012, September 12) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-thoughts-foster-collaboration-cultures.html>

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