

Understanding and embracing intercultural tensions and differences in teams

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"Teamwork makes the dream work." It's a popular phrase used to describe the merits of working in teams to get things done. When applied successfully, creating and collaborating with coworkers can

produce results that surpass a single individual's contribution.

In the past, [teams](#) were mostly homogeneous because this was the makeup of most organizations in the U.S. Today, teams are more diverse, and organizations can reap the benefits that individuals with different ethnicities and cultures bring to the table.

But not all teams are more collaborative because of their multicultural makeup. In fact, these differences may produce tensions and an inability to see the other side, creating barriers that would otherwise enable teams to foster creativity and information elaboration—the process of verbally expressing and exchanging information and viewpoints, and elaborating on these ideas. On the other hand, if a team downplays these differences, it could stifle constructive dialogue and creativity.

How does a team of individuals from different backgrounds coalesce by using their differences to their advantage rather than allowing them to inhibit information elaboration and creativity?

That's the question posed by two researchers, Christina Shalley and Pier Vittorio Mannucci, in their paper "Embracing multicultural tensions: How team members' multicultural paradox mindsets foster team information elaboration and creativity," published by *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process*, in November 2022.

The multicultural paradox mindset

According to Shalley, Sharon M. and Matthew R. Price Chair, and professor of Organizational Behavior at the Georgia Tech Scheller College of Business, one or more team members need to have a multicultural paradox mindset (MPM) to steer the team to creative success.

The researchers define multicultural paradox mindset (MPM) as "the degree to which one is accepting of and energized by intercultural tensions, both emphasizing cultural differences and finding common ground." Their analysis finds that team members who demonstrate a high MPM can positively accept and embrace these conflicting ideas to influence team behavior.

"A diverse team has the potential to be better at information elaboration, and, thus, creativity, than a non-diverse team. However, this potential needs to be unlocked. The presence of a member with high MPM is one way to achieve this within multicultural teams," Shalley explained.

These individuals, rather than ignoring differences, or as the researchers call it, taking "the cultural-blind approach," embrace differences and encourage other team members to express themselves and their perspectives, bringing more value to the creative process.

Testing their theory

To test their theory of the advantages of having an MPM, the researchers chose 217 participants and divided them into 63 diverse teams. Shalley and Mannucci divided the teams into "clusters" rather than geographical locations to ensure the teams met cultural diversity. For example, they placed a person from Spain with a person from China rather than putting a person from Spain and a person from France together.

They provided the teams with a scenario of an employee who was granted the ability to work from home to help an aging relative. This setup only became an issue when other employees wanted the same opportunity.

Each team was tasked with coming up with creative solutions to send to HR based on the available information.

"We found this task to be particularly well-suited for a study focusing on culturally diverse teams because of the deep cross-cultural differences in terms of views on [work-life balance](#) and remote work, how to care for [family members](#), valuing the elderly, and overall HR policies and practices," Shalley wrote.

The researchers accounted for several variables, including the way creativity is defined among individuals, gender diversity, and those who had lived abroad, which might have affected their experiences of and tolerance for different cultures.

In addition, the team accounted for team members who came from countries with a "tight" culture. These individuals tend to be warier of different values and perspectives and may not be as comfortable expressing creative ideas. This differed from a secondary group Shalley and her colleague considered who came from a "loose" culture. These individuals tend to assimilate more easily in a group, which may result in more [team members](#) possessing a multicultural paradox mindset.

"Leaders should definitely keep in mind who has a MPM when assembling a multicultural team. Without one (or more) members with a MPM, the risk of not unlocking the creative potential of the multicultural team is very high," Shalley noted.

More information: Pier Vittorio Mannucci et al, Embracing multicultural tensions: How team members' multicultural paradox mindsets foster team information elaboration and creativity, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104191](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104191)

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