



## Developing a multi-cultural team

Robert Day, a Senior Consultant for Farnham Castle, outlines a developmental approach to managing a multi-cultural team.

With management and employees from a variety of national and cultural backgrounds, developing an effective multicultural team provides a vital challenge for today's global businesses. First, they need to ensure this diverse workforce can work together harmoniously toward their common goals and, second, they need to maximise the contribution of each member.

Every organisation has a strategic choice to make about how it will face this issue and address diversity.

An organisation which adopts a defensive approach treats cultural differences as hazards – a series of weak links between people in which there is great potential for misunderstanding, conflict, mistrust and even resentment. It assumes that certain people are inherently culturally insensitive to others. Therefore, handling cultural 'diversity' means avoiding giving offence to groups or individuals, preventing 'harassment', and managing grievances. It may also have an implicit political objective to reduce the alleged dominance of one culture or another.

On the other hand, a developmental approach initially sees cultural differences for what they are: potentially different values, assumptions, expectations and behaviour which people bring to business as a result of their differing collective experiences. Moreover, the developmental approach recognises that these collective tendencies reveal themselves as individual differences. Members of a team are not there to represent a 'culture' or particular ethnic group. They represent themselves.

In this way, handling cultural differences means recognising two things:

- These differences can have a significant impact on how people of different national or ethnic backgrounds approach the day-to-day issues of business and how they conduct themselves within a discreet group or team and
- People want those differences, where they exist, to be acknowledged.

The developmental approach begins with the more positive assumption that, while people may be sometimes unaware of these differences, they are not automatically insensitive to them.

The outcome of the developmental approach is recognition of these different perspectives as alternative ways of handling particular situations. Cultural differences are no longer hazards but opportunities to strengthen the organisation through shared learning, better communication and new perspectives.

How can one tell whether an organisation has adopted the defensive or developmental approach? After all, any organisation can apply terms such as

'diversity', 'culture', 'differences' or even 'inclusiveness' to its general goals in this area, whatever the reality.

For a start, the defensive approach often arises as a reaction to grievances or conflicts. The organisation may define it through policies, procedures and make it visible through initiatives and 'programmes'. 'Training' is preoccupied with reducing insensitivity, often by trying to induce certain subjects to admit how insensitive they are.

Cross-cultural training specialists help clients follow a developmental route, which assumes a different form. It often starts at a local level and on a practical basis with an individual's or team's effort to improve the way people work together or to prepare for wider international responsibilities. It tends not to be fixed in policy or procedure but, instead, is driven by business needs and actual situations faced by people. Training is interactive, involving exchanges of impressions, experiences and problems among learners. It recognises that perceived differences are just as important as 'real' ones, for it is our perceptions of others that give rise to our reactions and judgements.

People learning to handle cultural differences will learn a great deal when they become aware of how they are culturally viewed by others. In addition to awareness, informational briefings increase people's knowledge of possible differences between cultures. That insight helps them see how 'strange' behaviour has its own cultural logic as the way in which a group of people have solved universal problems. With increased mutual awareness and knowledge, mistrust tends to evaporate and questions of 'dominance' become irrelevant.

The practical benefits of the developmental approach are seen in their effects on management style and on the way a team works together. Cultural differences are now seen as individual differences arising out of people's backgrounds. These various points of view, openly communicated, represent alternatives and choices available to the group for consideration and negotiation. A greater willingness to talk directly about differences helps build trust, facilitate decision-making and opens the way, where appropriate, to compromise.

The developmental approach requires sound leadership if it is to take root. It will be nourished by the resources of an organisation which is able to offer both collaborative training to raise awareness and knowledge and extensive expertise in various business cultures and in the challenges and goals of international business.

The developmental approach is further enhanced by training that strengthens the skills required to handle difficult situations and to communicate effectively in inter-cultural settings.

Truly 'valuing diversity' means valuing the contributions that 'diverse' individuals can make. A developmental, rather than a purely defensive, approach to dealing with cultural differences will help make that a reality.

By Robert Day

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Contact:

Farnham Castle, Farnham, Surrey GU9 0AG.

Tel: 01252 720406/ 721194

Web: [www.farnhamcastle.com](http://www.farnhamcastle.com)