

## Chapter Two

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### **Know Your Team**

*'It is so different to have German vigour challenging Latino American Style.'*

Seagram Manager 1996

*'Understanding other styles does not entail abandoning our own nor is recognising differences only a preparation to obliterating them.'*

A Kaplan 1996

**David thought he should let the meeting flow by simply introducing the topic, asking a relevant question and letting the team members argue out the solution. After a while he noticed that the Hong Kong, Chinese and Japanese team members were never speaking up, even though their English was perfect. He was puzzled.**

An international team leader can take little for granted. David can stop the discussion and ask the participants directly why they are not speaking up. However, in some cultures being publicly critical, especially of the leader is not an accepted norm. In order to understand what the problem might be, as well as how to acknowledge it openly and find a solution, David needs to understand the many ways in which cultural differences can influence the interaction within the team.

This chapter gives team leaders, facilitators and members a comprehensive understanding of these key cultural factors. With this knowledge, they can diagnose and so anticipate events like the one described above. A word of caution. We are aware that putting such a comprehensive chapter near the front of the book may alienate those wanting to quickly reach the 'what happens in these teams (Chapter Three) and what do I do about it' (Chapter Four). We therefore advise those in a hurry to read the first page, the bullets and the highlighted learning points within the chapter and return to it for specific issues, as and when they are needed. For others, read on for a deep dive that will show and remind you what is down below as you surface to participate in the team. From our research and experience, we have identified five culturally determined

and three organisational factors that we have seen have a marked impact on the performance of international teams.

### **Five 'Cultural' and Three 'Organisational' Factors that affect the Interaction in International Teams**

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#### **Cultural factors**

1. The degrees of difference or similarity that exist between the cultural norms of the individuals in the team
2. The degree to which individuals might manifest their cultural norms
3. Differences in language fluency, communication patterns, non verbals and who says what when
4. Culturally different leadership styles
5. The different expectations about key team processes

#### **Organisational factors**

6. The status of different cultures within the organisation
7. The geographic spread of the team members
8. The similarity or difference between functional, professional and other 'cultures'

### **Five Cultural Factors**

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#### **1 The degree of difference or similarity that exist between the cultural norms of the individuals in the team**

*Culture has been defined in many different ways*

In order to understand what a cultural norm is, you first have to understand what is meant by 'culture'. Unfortunately an agreed definition of culture remains elusive\*. Rather than defining the 'thing' itself, it is usually defined by the attributes which we recognise it by. These are different 'normal' behaviours, clothes, values, beliefs, traditions, rituals, assumptions and so on. After looking at many definitions (see Appendix 1), it is not hard to see why culture is often referred to as the 'dustbin' concept; throw everything in, especially if you do not understand it and cover it with the lid of culture. It is now common to talk about individual, gender, team, functional and organisational cultures as well as national cultures.

\*For some good discussions see books and articles recommended in Appendix 1.

*It is both an individual and group, internal and external affair*

Most people agree that culture is both an individual and group phenomenon. If you were the last person in the world, you would still have a culture. That is, you would still have a particular way of doing things and a particular set of explanations as to why you were doing things that way. People of one culture are presumed to have similar explanations for doing certain key things the same way, the group 'norms'.

Some of the ways in which culture can manifest are inside our minds, eg ways of thinking, values, beliefs, assumptions and others are more visible, such as rituals, clothes, food etc. This leads to a problem when comparing cultures. Some people view culture as subjective<sup>1</sup>. They argue that culture cannot be measured separately from the context of shared meaning and values in which things happen. From this standpoint, it is not *objectively possible* to compare a concept like leadership across different cultures. Other people define culture according to internal and external factors that they consider they can establish as 'robust' concepts. These are concepts that can have meaning *independently* of any one particular culture. From this 'objective' viewpoint it is valid to take a concept like leadership and compare it across cultures.

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It is important to keep in mind that while extensive cross-cultural comparison and research may elicit statistical differences across concepts like leadership, power and uncertainty, our understanding of what those differences mean in practice is probably limited.

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Some researchers now express the need to include both approaches. The important message is that because we are each culturally conditioned, there are some things we may never understand or see the same way other people do. It is often quoted that the tribes on the southernmost tip of South America did not 'see' Magellan's ship because it was outside any of their frames of reference.

*Gaining a reliable understanding of others' values, beliefs and assumptions which are thought to drive their behaviour is difficult*

The mix of internal and external, conscious and unconscious features in culture is often represented as an iceberg, a popular diagram copyrighted by several intercultural exponents. The difference is usually in the wording of external observable features marked above the 'water line' and internal, often unconscious features such as values, beliefs and deepest assumptions, marked below. The analogy of the iceberg is used to point out that there is usually much more below the visible surface than above.

One reason that it is hard to access what is below the surface is that there is very seldom a linear connection between one underlying value and one observable behaviour. Ask your team members if they have ever done

something that they disagreed with, but did it because their boss, teacher or parents told them to. It is likely that almost everyone will raise their hands. Now ask whether their own personal values were reflected in what they felt or what they did. The chances are most people will opt for what they felt. The question is 'then why did you do it?'

Usually because it was not *that* bad. They were not being asked to kill or perjure anyone, and the difference between what one was being asked to do and what one felt, was balanced by thoughts of losing one's job and not being able to support the family, being seen as unreliable, a coward, a failure etc. In other words, a set of different values. In contrast, the list of things that people imagine they would never do under any conceivable circumstances is usually very short. If values are defined as 'the preferred way of doing things'<sup>2</sup>, then one has to add 'in a favourable or particular context'. As the context changes, the results of this on-going evaluation will change 'normal' behaviour. The point being made is that each of our actions is based on a continuous juggling act of weighing different values against each other. This means that:

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You cannot predictably assess someone's values and beliefs by watching what they do, and by doing so, assume that you can predict what they might do in future.

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It is hard to ask people why they do something the way they do without causing offence. It is often also difficult to fit the reply into one's own framework of meaning.

**Over a period of months, a Kenyan night watchman always agreed to, but never turned up for, dog training and always said 'no problem'. He explained that he wanted to come, but something else always got in the way, so it was no problem. Only if he did not want to do the dog training at all, then it would be a problem. When later the same watchman was asked to join other employees to search for a missing item, he refused. He explained that if he found it, that would mean that he had known where it was all along.**

It is almost impossible to understand someone else's internal deliberations. It is easier to label them as being 'obstructive' or 'fickle'. You do need to ask them and prevent yourself from making quick value judgements. A team leader needs to keep an open mind until he or she can create an open discussion.

These difficulties explain our zealous support for an exercise called the 'cultural value checklist' described in Chapters Four and Five. The exercise makes the team member's different preferences and values that relate to the team's interaction explicit, laying them out on an equal playing field for discussion within the team.

*Nationality and ethnicity are only rough guides to someone's culture*

It has been suggested that people must share a language, live in the same time period and be geographically contiguous<sup>3</sup> to belong to the same culture. It is easy to see why nationality is usually used as the rough guide. Nations have to sort out some kind of common spoken and/or written language in order to function at the nation state level, even if there are numerous different official languages and scripts within the national borders.

One problem is that nationality can be given either by birthplace (eg UK) or ethnicity (eg Germany to date) depending on the policy of the countries involved. Nationality can be a purely external feature, changed by changing passport. To be useful in identifying possible cultural differences in international teams, nationality needs to reflect something about a person's thinking, expectations and underlying reasons for their behaviour. While some nationalities are ethnically/culturally quite homogeneous (eg Japan) others are now ethnically very diverse (eg Malaysia, Brazil, Kenya, Australia). The status of someone's ethnicity or sub-culture in a nation has been shown to affect their perceptions and behaviour<sup>4</sup> while they technically share the same nationality as everyone else. Nationality is obviously a rough categorisation, but using ethnicity and race turns out to be just as problematic.

*'People like books lose something in translation . . . It is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked amidst the scorn of strangers, upon whom they see rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging.'*

Salman Rushdie, *Shame*

The original Western categorisations of race by Linnaeus in 1758 were on the basis of known geography. They were changed in 1795 when a German called Blumenbach created five categories, Caucasian, American, Mongolian, Malay and Ethiopian, preferring Caucasians\* as he liked the way they looked. Amazingly the same arbitrary term is still used today. The American melting pot of 'Caucasians, Hispanics, Afro-Americans, Amer-Asians and East and First Nation Indians' to name a few, can still refer to groups of people with very different spoken and written languages and customs (eg East Indians; Tamils, Gujuratis, Bengalis, Punjabis etc) giving rise to different cognitive, behavioural and cultural norms. On the other hand a child born to second generation Gujurati parents in Canada will most likely have a very different set of norms and language skills to a child born to Gujurati parents in Gujurat. Ethnicity or race does not give more reliable definition of a person's cultural norms than nationality.

\*From the Caucasus (Bolshoy Kavkaz) mountains, between the Black and Caspian Seas.

A team leader has to remember that when anticipating differences based on different national norms, the boundaries between nationality, ethnicity and culture are very fuzzy.

*National stereotypes tend to be unhelpful, especially when attributed to individuals*

Stereotypes usually come through the media, experience, and jokes. 'We all have knowledge of them, but we do not all act on them.'<sup>5</sup> They can give a traveller some sense of security that they know something about an otherwise totally unknown destination. They can also leave a sense of frustration that instead of being a blank page ready for raw new experiences, one's mind is cluttered with usually negative and certainly questionable, generalisations about large groups of people. Not surprisingly, the ability to look afresh has been found to be more effective in international management<sup>6</sup>. Some interesting findings about stereotypes are:

- Stereotypes are fairly resilient and can be said to have a kernel of truth<sup>7</sup>. People would rather label individuals as non-stereotypical than change a national stereotype<sup>8</sup>. Hence stereotypes often change more slowly than actual cultures'.
- Stereotypes are often double sided<sup>9</sup>, 'Americans are friendly, open and flexible, but also insincere, uncritical and shallow'. Similarly, changes in stereotypes are not uniform. Canadian citizens initially described Indian immigrant women as 'quiet, polite and demure' which, based on the same behaviour changed after some months to 'dull, unfriendly and selfish'<sup>10</sup>.
- Interaction tends to reduce rather than undermine the biased perceptions that feed them<sup>11</sup>.
- The accuracy or subsequent adjustment of stereotypes depends on prior exposure to correct information or media<sup>12</sup>.

It is usually very frustrating to be on the receiving end of stereotypical behaviour.

**A Papua New Guinean top American management school graduate was sitting in his house in Port Moresby playing chess with an American friend. As he was also a local chief, he was wearing traditional dress. Another white person entered and talked to the American in fluent English, switching to pidgin when talking to the management school graduate. The graduate politely replied in fluent American English, yet the visiting white man continued to talk to him in pidgin. His stereotype about people in grass skirts prevented him from 'hearing' the reply.**

International team leaders need to be aware of their own stereotypes so that they do not act them out and can anticipate the problems other stereotypes will cause within the team.

*The research on cultural norms can be informative, but it needs to be applied with caution*

One of the aims of comparative statistical research on different cultural norms has been to create a more objective way than stereotypes of assessing similarities and differences.

After hearing a presentation expressing the need for cross-cultural work in a UK subsidiary, the Norwegian operations manager banged his fist on the table and exclaimed 'Culture? But we are of one culture'. Presumably he meant organisational culture. The consultant did not wait to find out, but quickly created a survey that showed that the British workers and Norwegian management had very different views of what the problems were. The operation manager fully supported the statistical results.

Statistical work comparing different value dimensions or leadership across many nationalities\* has been extremely helpful in persuading even the most hardened sceptics that national cultural differences do exist and can delay, if not wreck, international business ventures and teams.

International team leaders and members need to read the literature (see a sample in Appendix One) that explores the national norms of their team members. The peaks of the normal statistical curves that describe cultural norms in the value research will show which cultures are statistically closer on specific issues and which are farther apart<sup>13</sup>. While reading this literature, team leaders need to exercise caution and remember that:

- a Any individual may fall anywhere within the statistically normal curve describing their culture. If one falls at the edges of a national curve, there is little explanation of how this might modify one's values and behaviour.
- b It may be that Americans and British people consistently score as more individualistic than Japanese and Koreans. However, the way in which they are individualistic may be very different. For instance, Americans are proud to be able to tell you how good they are at something, whereas traditionally most British people believed actions spoke louder than words and were taught not to discuss their achievements. This can lead to

\* Common value dimensions and further reading on this much used and discussed approach are available in Appendix One.

the British perceiving the Americans as pushy and arrogant and the Americans perceiving the British as ineffectual and underachieving. East Coast Americans are often very conservative in their dress and business behaviour, which differs from California. The way people manifest the measured norms can be very specific to regions and countries.

- c The discussion above demonstrated how difficult it is to link specific values to specific behaviours. Not surprisingly, there is no clear explanation of how *value* dimensions assessed from written questionnaires actually influences *behaviour* in different social contexts. Suppose someone is assessed as highly individualistic on a pre-questionnaire, finds it individually worthwhile to be very group oriented when working with a particular team, but again measures highly individualistic on a post questionnaire. People who believe all cultures are converging into one homogeneous business culture may take it as evidence to support their argument. Others may regard the behaviour as a temporary adaptation and not related to the real underlying cultural values of the participant. Still others may take it as a sign of bi-culturalism or that the individual is highly adaptable across cultures.

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So, reading and knowing the literature on cultural norms does not mean you can accurately predict individual behaviour in your team.

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Despite these limitations, one interesting use of cultural norms is assessing 'readiness' to work in self managed work teams. In-depth studies have suggested that different countries will embrace or resist this form of work for different reasons<sup>14</sup>. Americans tend to be more individualistic than Mexicans and hence, less team oriented, but are more comfortable with being autonomous. People who have an individually based outlook tend to regard team pay structures as unfair, more than they resist self managed teams per se. One set of findings suggest that there have been some significant shifts in some of the cultural dimensions over the last twenty-five years. America was slightly more collectivist and even less hierarchically oriented than before, suggesting that maybe as new work forms are introduced and team members start to have positive experiences, values can change.

Duncan Crundwell, an enlightened CEO has written a thesis looking at the implementation of self managed work teams in his small dynamic UK based company<sup>15</sup>. As the workforce primarily consisted of American, British and Japanese employees, he came up with the following assessment of cultural norms that would help or hinder working in these teams (Table 2.1).

Each culture is seen as having advantages and disadvantages. In Britain, the strong sense of initiative and willingness to defer gratification, support the ambiguous and slow process of establishing self managed work teams. However, the lack of motivation and short-term focus of management can be a strong hindrance. In Japan the strong team ethic and long-term focus would both support setting up teams, but the hierarchical approach and lack of

**Table 2.1:** Cultural norms that help or hinder self managed work teams

<b>Country</b>	<b>Cultural advantages</b>	<b>Cultural disadvantages</b>
<i>Britain</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong sense of initiative</li> <li>Can be hard working</li> <li>Willing to defer gratification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poorly motivated management structure</li> <li>Low ability managers</li> <li>Poorly educated management</li> <li>Short-term profit mentality</li> <li>Not socially acceptable to excel at business</li> </ul>
<i>Japan</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Long term investment strategy</li> <li>Strong loyalty</li> <li>Very hard working</li> <li>Strong team orientation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education system that does not support creativity and abstract thought</li> <li>Very bureaucratic</li> <li>Hierarchical</li> <li>Centralised structure</li> </ul>
<i>America</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strongly encouraged to excel in business</li> <li>Free of social class constraints</li> <li>Decentralised structure in business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack initiative</li> <li>Expect instant gratification</li> <li>Had it easy for too long</li> <li>Work for personal recognition</li> </ul>

creativity will work against the team achieving self management. In America there is much less acceptance of formal hierarchy as people prefer to be autonomous, however, the need for instant gratification can work against the time it takes to get these teams working effectively. The same CEO who made the study found that novelty value made setting up self managed teams in Britain, where management was usually the problem, much easier than in America, where his style was just like everyone else's.

Our advice is to know these cultural norms, and to handle them with care. Looking at the norms may give the team leader and members some common starting points that are not so obviously apparent. For instance, although they may interpret it differently, Japanese and Malawians can share a strong preference for collectivist behaviours with a high regard for the leader. But this is as far as extrapolation from the value dimensions should go. As the Papua New Guinean example earlier showed, acting on preconceived generalities is usually very offensive and ineffective. Once the team has matured, cultural differences and stereotypes can become a source of light-hearted humour as well as richness.

When thinking about the difference between the cultural norms, international team leaders and members need to remember that:

- **Culture has been defined in many different ways.**
- **It is both an internal and external, individual and group affair.**
- **Gaining a reliable understanding of others' values, beliefs and assumptions is difficult.**
- **Nationality is only a rough guide to someone's culture.**
- **National stereotypes tend to be unhelpful, especially when attributed to individuals.**
- **The research on cultural norms can be informative, but needs to be applied with caution.**

## **2 The degree to which different people may manifest their cultural norms**

*Concepts of self and personality differ between cultures*

Personality and self is understood and defined differently in different cultures. Eastern writers note that Western cultures think that 'every society is composed of individuals and that every culture is created by and expressed in the individual'<sup>16</sup>. They point out that languages like English and French treat each person as if that person exists as a separate independent entity from other people. In Japanese, a 'person' does not have a hard shell of personality or definite identity as an 'individual', even though he or she does have a membrane to separate him/her from people<sup>17</sup>.

Most Western cultures currently seem to think of 'self' or 'me' as some kind of insoluble nugget residing somewhere in the brain (or in more current holistic thinking, the mind and body) that needs 'self development' or assertiveness training to achieve what is wanted in life. On the other hand, the aim of traditional Indian Yogic techniques is to dissolve the illusionary web of desires called 'self' by understanding how thought creates it in the first place. As most people are brought up in one culture, it is unlikely that any one person can quite understand how others really think of themselves in relation to other 'people'.

Even without different interpretations of what 'I am', searching for what thoughts and action result from personality and what thoughts and actions result from cultural conditioning is a definitely fuzzy pursuit<sup>18</sup>. Yet again, despite the fuzziness, it does seem intuitively okay to say how someone as a personality has responded to different life experiences, can determine how strongly they adhere to their national norms. The two are linked.

*Personality and experience can change the extent to which someone exhibits national norms*

It is obvious that people adapt and that cultures as a whole do change for all

sorts of internal and external environmental reasons. Personality, experience and the amount someone is exposed to other cultures may lead to them being strongly or weakly committed to national norms. Yet research has shown that international experience is no guarantee of greater international expertise or understanding. It depends on the individual. Not surprisingly researchers have found that people who base their expectations and thinking only around their own culture, are less able to adjust than more open minded individuals. As one CEO expressed it 'people with high ego needs cannot adjust to other cultures'.

*People adapt, but 'good' adaptation is often seen to be one way*

Extreme adherence to cultural norms is, of course, the source of much amusement in films and stories. Yet even cultural adaptation is riddled with status issues. Many Western expatriates in the richest parts of developing capitals live in luxurious compounds, with servants and swimming pools. Compare this with the shock for managers from developing countries of dealing directly with developed metropolises from a self-contained flat. It is easy to imagine who achieves the greatest learning curve. What is more, 'good' adaptation tends to be strongly viewed as one way by most Western cultures. Westerners who adapt to local cultures are usually derogatorily described as 'going native' while it is considered helpful for those from other cultures to fit seamlessly into Western business cultures. 'Sometimes I even forget that he is Indian/Japanese'. Thankfully, even for Western business people, some adaptation to other cultures is usually essential to success. The question is 'what is it that changes when people adapt to other cultures?'

**One Hong Kong Chinese team described themselves jokingly as bananas ... yellow on the outside, but white inside. When it came to someone being elected or self electing as an observer, the team was in confusion. They finally agreed to play an elimination game using hand signs until one person was left. Nobody wanted to self-elect out of the team and nobody wanted to embarrass anyone by suggesting that someone should be isolated from the team. In American or European teams, a number of people usually rush to select themselves, or names are usually quickly put forward.**

*People may adapt behaviour without changing deeper values*

While people may exhibit adaptable behaviour, deeper values may not change. It will depend on the depth at which the value is held and how entrenched a behavioural pattern is. The way we see and think about the world is deeply embedded in our mother tongue. As such, it is likely that the way we think and process information encapsulated by that language, would probably be the last to change. In thinking about the extent to which a team member may or may not adhere to their cultural norms, international team leaders need to remember that:



**Figure 2.1:** Role modelling effective international working

- **Personality and experience can change the extent to which someone exhibits national norms.**
- **Concepts of self and personality differ between cultures.**
- **People adapt, but 'good' adaptation is often seen to be one way.**
- **International experience will change some people more than others, it is no guarantee of greater international expertise or understanding.**
- **People may adapt behaviour without changing deeper values.**

So in summary, it is important to understand how different cultural norms are likely to affect someone's behaviour in a team, while at the same time appreciating that they may behave in a totally different way.

### **3 Differences in languages, fluency, communication patterns, non verbals and who says what, when**

*Language changes as it spreads*

*'I always thought we spoke the same language, but there are loads of differences. I have ended up having more misunderstandings with my American colleagues than my Japanese counterpart, just because I assumed they knew what I meant.'*

*'You Brits have sayings that are complete nonsense over here.'  
'It's the simple words that trip us up.'*

Languages develop in particular environments and often either die out or spread. In spreading, they change. Current 'American' English uses many different words and grammatical structures that are misunderstood in 'English' English. Microsoft currently lists nine 'types' of English in its spell checker. In colonial countries where English, French, German or Portuguese for instance have been imposed and maintained as the language of government and commerce, the grammar and word usage usually reflect the nuances from the original language in those countries. As a result, as the quotes infer, misunderstandings can easily occur.

*Some languages are precise about relationships, others imprecise*

English is a language that tries to have fairly exact meanings independent of how it is said. Although British suggestions are in fact often direct orders, Arabic, Kiswahili, Japanese and Chinese do rely much more heavily on inflection, pitch, tone, context and non-verbal cues to convey the real meaning of the word. English people tend to expect 'Yes' to mean precise agreement. Yet many languages have short words that mean 'I have heard you', not 'I agree'. 'Hai' in Japanese, 'Acha' in Hindi. These are usually translated into 'Yes' or 'Okay' in English. This leads to countless cases of English speakers getting angry when others 'go back on their agreements'.

**One British manager asked his Finnish colleagues to say 'Yes Yes' when they agreed to an action point rather than just acknowledge it.**

On the other hand, English is very imprecise about relationships. English verbs tend to stress informality and symmetrical power relationships unlike Japanese and Korean which emphasise formality and asymmetrical power relationships.

Korean has special vocabularies for different sexes, different degrees of social status, different degrees of intimacy and different formal languages. Similarly the ending of a Hindi verb will express the power difference, intimacy and level of formality of a relationship. Barely audible small changes express whether 'I will do something,' 'I will have someone do something,' or 'I will make someone else do something.' Imagine then getting used to only using an impersonal 'you' in English, rather than showing the level of respect and intimacy, or having to state explicitly that I will have someone do that for me, rather than I will do it for you.

*Language deeply affects the way people think and where they will put important information*

Many Chinese and Japanese characters were originally based on pictorial representations of reality. This creates a written Chinese script that crosses many spoken languages and is recognisable after thousands of years (most English people need to have Chaucer 1342–1400 AD translated). Depicting reality supports concrete thinking not abstract hypothetical thinking<sup>19</sup>. Not only what information is considered useful, but how it is presented is different. Chinese managers have suggested that they would be seen as 'rude immodest, pushy and lose face for acting aggressively if they put the information they wanted to convey at the beginning of a sentence like Americans and British'<sup>20</sup>.

**One Japanese manager in Unilever said 'I learnt that I had to put the important information at the beginning or else nobody will hear me'.**

*Silence and pauses mean different things in different cultures*

The pace of speech is also interpreted differently and second language speakers are obviously more likely to speak more slowly. Korean listeners attributed credibility to a male talking at a slow pace (women were found to have little credibility whatever their pace), whereas American listeners attribute credibility to a much faster pace<sup>21</sup>.

There is evidence that different cultures have different uses of silence and patterns of overlap or interruption. Silences and pauses in Japan and some Scandinavian countries are a sign of respect for the previous speaker, and that you are absorbing what they are saying. Apparently the Japanese have a saying that goes 'he who speaks is a dumb ass'<sup>22</sup>. When many Americans and British people first encounter long pauses, they are extremely uncomfortable and immediately assume that something is wrong. Silences and pauses in America and Britain usually mean that you are lost for words, 'stonewalling' or ignoring someone. The problem is that silences do sometimes mean respect, but can also be a result of another strong East, South East Asian and African norm of not voicing criticism in public.

**A team leader of one predominantly Finnish team stood up with two other teams present, and said 'we have had great difficulties working as an international team'. The facilitator asked 'do you want to share what they have been?' 'No' was the resounding response.**

The impact and use of interruption is different across cultures. Because the important information is at the beginning, interrupting in English usually means

only losing the padding. In German and Hindi for instance, the verb is at the end of the sentence. In Hindi, 'kal' means yesterday and tomorrow, only the tense in the verb at the end of the sentence will tell you which one it is.

Many Japanese working in English will wait for a pause before they speak, or not speak at all. However, Japanese teams working in Japanese have very high levels of simultaneous talk. The purpose of it is to show enjoyment of conversing in a harmonious atmosphere by maintaining and supporting the partner's speech<sup>23</sup>. However, American and British speakers for instance, tend to use simultaneous talk to interrupt and cut other people off as the underlying rule is that only one person should be talking at once. As illustrated in the next chapter, interruption patterns play a significant role in who gets to talk in international teams. American and English presenters are often very put off when Italian listeners start discussing loudly between themselves while the presenter is still talking.

*Second language speakers will tend to speak less*

Most people find that heterogeneous teams have greater communication difficulties than homogeneous teams. In international teams, fluency with the working language as well as different linguistics norms and backgrounds also exacerbate these difficulties even more. Less fluent team members are more likely to be excluded from the interaction of a team. The last four points all contribute to the way in which this happens as illustrated in the next chapter.

*Team leaders and members need to actively lower the costs and increase the benefits for second language speakers to speak*

When team members have different levels of fluency in the working language, they will constantly assess the cost or the benefit to the team of speaking up. By the time a second language speaker has mentally constructed or translated what they want to say, the rest of the fluent members have usually moved on. The second language speaker is likely to do a quick mental calculation. 'Is what I want to say important enough to bring the group back to the point that they have just left? What will their response be?' If images of angry impatient faces immediately come to mind, then the point will have to be evaluated as very urgent or of much higher quality and importance than what the first language speakers have just said. If an image comes to mind of being met with a smiling 'Yes, by all means' then the personal cost of the second language speaker intervening is much reduced.

If the fluent members have not completely forgotten about the quieter members, they are likely to occasionally assess the cost/benefits of slowing down to ask a second language speaker whose points may take more time, perhaps be expressed in 'painful' language or come out in a strange order with 'muddled' irrelevant logic. Probably if they think they are doing okay with the

task, they will carry on with the justification 'well, if X really has something important to say, he/she will stop us'. As illustrated in the next chapter, good teams create a pattern of communication with enough small pauses that people can easily speak up.

When working in a foreign language like English, people can also feel the need to re-affirm certain aspects of their cultural identity that they do not feel the need to do when speaking in their mother tongue<sup>24</sup>.

#### *Non-verbal communication differs across cultures*

Non-verbal communication is an important aspect of communication in teams. Researchers have found that when using groupware computer technology, the commitment to the teamwork is far higher if the team is sitting together in the same room. Presumably the occasional round of laughter and grunts in response to points being made on the large screen keeps people interested. Grunts and hand gestures have different meanings in different cultures.

**One angry British driver was stunned as a pushy aggressive 'matatu' (a small minibus) driver in Kenya backed off instead of erupting in rage, after being shown a two-finger sign showing the back of the hand. While it is about as rude as you can get in Britain, in Kenya the same sign means 'hey, let's be peaceful'. Making a circle between the first and forefinger means 'spot on' in America, 'nothing' in France, something rude in Israel and is extremely rude in Columbia. Americans find comfortable pointing at people, considered rude in Britain, like showing the soles of your shoes in Arab countries and India, or passing things with your left hand. There are many examples pointing out the need for care.**

On a subtler level, the length of eye contact is also crucial. Looking someone straight in the eye is considered a sign of honesty, determination and straightforwardness in the UK and America. A Kikuyu intercultural trainer would tell of how he had never looked his father in the eye once during his lifetime. It would have been a mark of disrespect. When testifying against an alleged West Indian thief, an elderly British lady said, 'I knew he was lying because he would not look me straight in the eye'.

There are different levels of comfort with demonstrable emotion and physical touching between cultures. While a Turk may display a large show of emotional outpouring as a necessary ingredient to getting a good price, a Finn may signal displeasure with an almost imperceptible raise of one eyebrow. One British manager went to a meeting in Portugal and sat with his mouth open as all the other male managers hugged the Chairman who had come in late, crying. The meeting then proceeded. An American lady was alienated for the rest of the

week when the first cross-cultural learning exercise on a week long programme in Germany involved touching people that she did not know well. On the other hand, a Spanish manager declared that if he did not kiss his secretary every morning, she would wonder what was wrong.

We often unconsciously mirror each others movements as a way of tuning in. It is not uncommon to see some small movement reflected back and pass around the team. If one person shifts in their chair or leans back, so does someone else, perhaps to keep them company. At a micro-level, body rhythms associated with the consonant-vowel-consonant patterns of speech and listening are common across all nationalities and languages<sup>25</sup>. Despite such reassuring imperceptible sameness, team leaders and members have to be careful about coming to hasty assumptions about the meaning of each other's ways of speaking and visible gesturing.

*There is no one right way to communicate in an international team*

Effective or ineffective patterns of listening and interacting based on language use are usually set within the first few minutes and will continue unless something else intervenes. It is important that everyone feels that their contribution has been well received and given proper consideration. Setting good ground rules and having good leadership or facilitation to break up dominant patterns is helpful. That said, there is no one set way that a team should interact to be effective. There are many tactics that teams can adopt depending on what is actually going on in the team.

**In one UNEP/World bank meeting on transport and air pollution, a representative of the automotive industry was determined to give the industry's view at all costs. Initially, his contributions were forcefully stated objections to what else was being explored, which left no room for creative discussion. After a while, the rest of the team met any contribution from this man with a short but stony silence. After the pause, during which most of the team either stared at him or their laps, someone else would carry on with a nod in his direction, but as if he had not spoken. By the second day, he was approaching team members, especially during the breaks, and trying to soften what he had to say in an almost apologetic way. In effect he was asking to be let back in on the understanding that he would be less belligerent and more collaborative in his approach.**

Perhaps the team leader could have been more explicit in saying that it was not his ideas that were difficult, only the way he was presenting them. Instead the team communicated through their behaviour, which was effective in the end. At the other end of the spectrum strategically losing your cool can also cut through hours of ineffective talk. However, as Aristotle warned 'anyone can become angry – that

is easy; but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree at the right time, for the right purpose in the right way – this is not easy'<sup>26</sup>.

When planning how to manage the interaction in an international team, team leaders need to remember that:

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- **Language changes as it spreads – there are many 'types' of English.**
  - **Some languages are precise about relationships, others imprecise.**
  - **Language deeply affects the way people think and where they will put important information.**
  - **Silence and pauses mean different things in different cultures. Second language speakers will tend to speak less (and that does not equate with being less intelligent or having less to say).**
  - **Team leaders and members need to actively lower the costs and increase the benefits for second language speakers to speak.**
  - **Non-verbal communication differs across cultures.**
  - **There is no one right way to communicate in an international team.**
- 

#### **4 Culturally different leadership styles**

*'I do not know why some of them bother turning up, they don't say a word all meeting.'*

*'He's so autocratic, he just loves the sound of his own voice, when he gets going I just switch off – he's not interested in my view so I shut up.'*

*'It's brilliant, she really involves the whole team – if you don't need to go to a meeting or cannot make it – she makes sure she catches up with you later to fill you in.'*

As the quotes remind us, this aspect of international teamwork is crucial and is touched upon again in Chapter Seven. Exactly what is appropriate and when, will be dependent on the cultural context and make up of the team. Recently the mostly American quest for a universal effective leadership style has centred on changing autocratic, non consultative, controlling leaders into more 'participative', 'visionary', 'intuitive', 'ethically principled', 'collaborative' 'facilitators and stewards' who are able to handle diversity.

Words like 'equal power', 'mutual accountability', 'equal participation' have also recently taken centre stage in the discussion on effective national or international teams. On seeing the words 'equal power' one French manager leapt out of his seat shouting 'stupid Anglo-Saxon list, there is no such thing as equal power in France'. Even so, as much management theory emerges from America, the usually implied message is that large hierarchies are outdated and cultures still demonstrating high levels of power distance (the extent to which

**Table 2.2:** Hong Kong Chinese/Australian Behaviours

<b>Hong Kong Chinese leaders</b>	<b>Australian leaders</b>
Tend to lecture subordinates about principles behind policies and instructions	Hover between authority assertion and authority disclaiming attitudes
Expressly invite the contributions of named subordinates	Seldom expressly invite subordinates to contribute
Greater use of open questions and strategies to draw out sensitive issues from subordinates, eg greater use of explicit choices and open ended consultation	Much less open consultation. Instead, use of loaded questions and ritualistic consultation to involve and influence the subordinates towards desired outcome
Warm hearted, paternalistic, condescending	
Similar gate-keeping and facilitatory strategies and appeals to organisational principles applied more situationally	Similar gate-keeping and facilitatory strategies and appeals to organisational principles applied more universally
<b>Hong Kong Chinese subordinates</b>	<b>Australian subordinates</b>
React with ready compliance and ritualistic deference. Will only cover factual non evaluative statements until manager draws it out further.	Query and challenge directives. Self initiated and self sustained pattern of challenging the establishment.
Very few unsolicited contributions.	More frequent unsolicited propositions, show more initiative and are more active in the discussions.
More direct invited and uninvited disagreement with superiors when asked, especially when defending their own proposition, but never self initiated. Fewer 'hedges' and 'disclaimers'	Less direct disagreement with superiors, more use of 'hedges' and 'disclaimers'. Greater range of indirectness.
Engage in acrid exchange and heated discussion	Engage in acrid exchange and heated discussion
Consensus in hierarchical meetings but look to leader for final decision	Consensus in hierarchical meetings but look to leader for final decision

power is distributed unequally) (eg where subordinates still expect to be told what to do and how to do it) are seen as undeveloped and undemocratic. To quote one writer 'even illiterate peasants (in Peru) can use participative management effectively if they are taught to do so'<sup>27</sup> Even if one ignores the condescending tone, a lot will depend on how the word 'participative' is interpreted.

One researcher<sup>28</sup> looked at the interaction between team leader and members in twenty-two Hong Kong Chinese and twenty-two Australian banking teams. The results are shown in Table 2.2.

So if participative leadership means allowing people to speak as and when they want to, then the Australians were more participative than Hong Kong Chinese. If, however, participative leadership means stimulating open-ended

unbiased consultation and allowing direct statements of disagreement and criticism, then the Hong Kong Chinese were more participative than Australians. If participative leadership means allowing acrid exchange and heated discussion in the search for consensus with the leader making the final decision in difficult situations, then both Hong Kong Chinese and Australians were equally participative. Clearly one cultural understanding of concepts like 'participative management' is ineffective. The other important message from comparing the two styles is that:

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Structuring a team's interaction can increase rather than decrease individual participation and protect minority views.

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Making sure your leadership style fits the over-riding cultural milieu of the teams is important. Three operational team leaders in a Hong Kong Telecoms company were American, Samoan and Canadian. The American had been in Hong Kong for twenty years, the Samoan for three and the Canadian for eight months. The accepted 'formal' pattern of interaction of the chair asking someone to speak and then summing up the information before passing on to ask the next person clearly irritated the Canadian when he was a team member of the Samoan's team. When it came to leading his own team, he would ask someone to speak and then leave the conversation to follow a 'natural' flow. Discussions would trail off with him saying 'okay, okay, okay'. A female Chinese finance manager had come to the meeting to contribute and listen to the team's work. She soon fell into the role of summing up the points. Although the Canadian team leader spoke the most in his team, he was the only operational team leader in the study who was not perceived as having had the most influence on the team; the female finance officer was seen as more influential.

On the other hand, one pan-European team in a London-based oil company was led by a laid-back Scotsman. He would stretch his arms over his head and ask 'so what do we want to do?' Although a German counterpart talked more and did his best to dominate the meeting, the Scotsman maintained his role as being the place where agreements were 'ratified' and clear explanations of contextual matters were to be found. The Scotsman was perceived to have had the most influence. If maintaining influence is important, you can afford not to be the pivot of the interaction in Europe, but not always in Hong Kong.

The best way to find out what is expected of you as a leader is to ask the team in a way that puts different expectations on an equal footing. The cultural value checklist exercise described in Chapters Four and Five unearths the different preferences and expectations at the beginning of the teamwork. The team can then, explicitly or implicitly, guide the leader towards the most appropriate style for that mix of nationalities in that organisational and cultural context.

In anticipating what leadership style to adopt, international team leaders do well to remember that:

- ***Preferred and effective leadership styles vary across cultures.***
- ***Team members will come with different expectations and preferences.***
- ***There is no one universally effective style for all teams, tasks and team stages.***
- ***The most appropriate style is best negotiated with the team.***

### **5 Different expectations of what constitutes effective group behaviour**

Team members will have different understandings of many group processes. One joint venture team facilitator observed that unlike the Americans, the Germans preferred to build trust slowly based on deeds and to start off in a formal, matter of fact mode where contributions were assertive and conclusive with a high tolerance of silence<sup>29</sup>. They also preferred adherence to a predetermined agenda in meetings, with a centralised 'director' organising the patterns of contributions. While many such group processes are influenced by different cultural expectations, in this chapter we will focus on conflict resolution and decision making.

*Conflict resolution and preferred decision making processes vary across cultures*

*Conflict resolution*

Different cultures have very different ways of successfully resolving conflicts depending on the context.

In one international institute with a dysfunctional director general (DG), both the local African staff and the international staff were agreed that they had a problem with a lack of vision and random management decisions. However, the local African staff were appalled when the international staff asked the DG critical questions in a large group meeting. Speaking out and criticising the boss was not their way of solving the problem.

*'There's a couple of Americans on our team who just tell it like it is – sometimes they go too far and a real row breaks out, that wastes so much time.'*

Some cultures prefer indirect conflict resolution. A British personnel manager for a Japanese company in London bemoaned the fact that if an employee made a mistake, his or her desk would be moved to the window from the more important



**Figure 2.2:** Resolving conflict in international teams

central position. The employee would then have to ask a string of people to find out what he or she had done wrong. It would take about a year for their desk to be slowly moved back to the original position. Expatriate managers in South Africa have successfully resorted to using the psychic powers of the local shaman to find the whereabouts of the stolen computers when nobody would own up.

*'I've realised now that I have to got to deal with things while everyone is in the room. I was leaving it to try to do it one on one, but you can't bollock\* someone on the phone too easily without really offending them.'*

Dutch and Americans are renowned for favouring 'straight talking' and getting it 'all out on the table'. However, despite these generally accepted stereotypes, it is the authors' perception that on the whole, American bosses find it hard to deal with criticism. Persisting in order to get one's point heard is seen as 'being so full of anger that you had better see a psychiatrist'. The responses to conflict in many cultures often seem to be based on denial, covering things up to smooth things over, or knee-jerk reactions such as instantaneous dismissal. If mediation is called for, mediators in Norway and Germany are expected to be rational and

\* An English slang word/idiom meaning to reprimand or discipline someone.

emotionally distant. In America, it helps to be 'warm and supportive', yet in China, mediators are expected to persuade, cajole, haggle and negotiate.

Some of the most detailed work on cross-cultural conflict resolution has been done within Siemens, the German based power and electrical company. In American/German teams, Americans tended to be much less direct than Germans in confronting conflict situations. Unlike the Germans, they took strong argument as a personal attack. Americans are much more ready to use emotional resolution rather than long factual debates and so go through the 'resolution cycle' much faster than Germans. Americans also preferred to focus on the future and the broad picture, while the Germans preferred to start with the detail of 'what is'. In any negotiations, the Germans were looking for a workable compromise of the facts, while the Americans were looking for a good deal and to drive a hard bargain<sup>30</sup>.

When these kinds of detail begin to emerge between cultures that are both considered part of the industrialised 'Western' world, it is not hard to imagine how difficult it is for much more mixed teams to resolve conflicts to everyone's satisfaction. In fact in many cross-cultural conflicts, it is evident that people cannot *see* the problems other people are bringing forward, let alone understand how to resolve them. What international team leaders and members need to appreciate is that conflict between cultures is not just about differences in ideas, but often tests deeply held assumptions about other people.

**Suzannah is a brilliant Taiwanese born research analyst in an aggressive American power company. She is posted in London. Two (of many) examples illustrate how she used her indefatigable sense of detail and logic to guide her action and in doing so, unwittingly crossed unwritten rules that caused major problems.**

**Her boss suggested that she buy the books that she needed to cover her particular area. Being thorough, she bought four suitcases full. That was not what he had had in mind. The hidden assumption that he meant about six or ten was not spelled out. Suzannah had 'taken advantage' of the system.**

**Because of her status in the UK she did not have a cash card for the canteen. When she asked the personnel manager, she was told that the system could not handle it. Suzannah took the initiative and worked directly with the computer people to change the system. The personnel officer was surprised to see her with a cash card and asked her how she had obtained one when she had been told she could not have one. Suzannah explained how she had sorted out the personnel manager's problem and changed the system. The personnel manager was furious. In her eyes, Suzannah had gone behind her back and undermined her authority. She went on to create many problems for Suzannah who only thought she was improving the system and solving problems. Many months later, Suzannah was still struggling to understand what the real rules were supposed to be and how she would get to know about them without an endless string of misunderstandings.**

Unlike Siemens, most companies do not spend a lot of effort on persuading their team members to delve deeper and to admit that they do not understand each other well. People like Suzannah are often left to struggle and become labelled, at best, as 'oddballs' and at worst as a 'smart ass' who wants to buck the system and show how clever she is. In practice, what often happens in international teams is that the less powerful members of the team capitulate to the resolution methods of the more powerful members. However, few people act on decisions which they still quietly disagree with or feel that the method by which they are arrived was biased and unfair.

#### *Decision making*

International team members are likely to have great differences, not only about the processes that lead to decisions, but also about who should be involved. The speed of decisions in any one culture will depend on:

- who is expected to be involved with making them;
- how time is seen to work;
- how much any one culture adheres to past traditions that change slowly;
- what kind of information someone believes they need before they can make a decision.

Take time for instance. For some people, time (and the language used to express it) is seen as a linear process that follows a linear pattern of cause and effect and that can be spilt up into meaningful segments. Specific tasks are sequentially laid into these segments. For others, it is more like an open space in which things can happen simultaneously and in which the play of social interactions takes place and will probably determine the next move. Often just waiting means that the missing link will come around and the issue will decide itself. 'Time will tell'.

Not all languages adhere to Greenwich meantime: Nine am UK time would be called three 'in the morning' Kiswahili time (based on the unchanging equatorial dawn and dusk) and mistakes are made switching back and forth between languages. Beyond counting time differently, the amount of importance people give to being driven to make decisions by the Western clock varies considerably from culture to culture. This fact may underlie some of the very different interpretations about what people mean when they say 'yes. I will get it to you soon'.

*'The Italians say yes, even if they mean no – I never know if the project is really on track until a crisis blows up in my face.'*

When start-up time is not given to creating a decision-making process that consciously integrates these large differences, a few people usually end up very frustrated.

In a top executive committee of an Italian American 'joint venture' even after two years, the Americans were sure that the plenary committee meetings were supposed to be where decisions were made. The Italian Chief Executive on the other hand was sure, as were the other Italians, that it was just a forum to have some last minute feedback on the decisions he was about to make and which he had already discussed one on one with the 'relevant' people. This led one American to comment that 'These meetings seem to be like play-acting. I always feel that the actual decisions are being made behind the scenes, somewhere back in Italy'.

*'We just seem to go round in circles with no-one willing to make a decision. It's getting really frustrating.'*

A common pattern in international teams is that team members will initially find that they have a wide range of perspectives on certain issues. Instead of looking at *how* to deal with these different inputs, the team often starts going around and around with everyone restating their own viewpoints in slightly modified terms. In desperation, the majority take sides with others whose views are most similar to themselves. Usually one or two people have stuck to their points and not joined the larger subgroup. A quick vote creates a 'decision' and rules them out. The ones who maintained their positions are left feeling alienated, fed up and as if nobody listened at all to what they thought was important.

This pattern will repeat again and again, until the team realises that having gathered all the different points of view, they need 'time out' to decide on a decision making process that will evaluate everyone's viewpoints and collectively reach some agreement. There are many models and techniques widely available<sup>31</sup>.

*Team leaders and members need to actively understand the differences and agree workable processes before getting involved in the content*

These examples serve only to reinforce the point that each team needs to *consciously* work through each of these processes as and when they need them and tease out the different underlying expectations in the team. By using the cultural value checklist described briefly in Chapter Five, a team can raise these differences in its early stages and set some basic ground rules. In anticipating how to manage the group processes, international team leaders need to remember that:

- *Team members will have different understandings of many group processes.*
  - *Conflict resolution and preferred decision making processes vary across cultures.*
  - *Team leaders and members need to actively understand the differences and agree workable processes before getting involved in the content.*
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### **Three Organisational Factors**

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International teams exist within corporations that not only have specific roots in one or two cultures, but also have differing amounts and types of international experience. These organisational features will affect what happens in these teams. We strongly support the view that the benefits or problems that cultural differences give to a company is not just to do with the differences themselves. 'Contextual factors act either to fan the flames of inter-group conflict and cross-cultural polarisation or to encourage organisational members to accept these differences'<sup>32</sup>. The organisational responses to internationalisation described in Chapter Eight are key. A team leader should be aware of the total organisational response and imagine how it will affect his/her team. There are then three issues that he/she will need to look at very carefully.

### **6 The status of different cultures within the team and organisation**

*Team leaders and members have to be aware that structural, linguistic and perceived inequalities can be far more dysfunctional than cultural differences per se*

This issue was raised in Chapter One and will be illustrated in full in the next chapter. In order to look deeper, it is useful to first distinguish between heterogeneity and inequality. Heterogeneity comes from different kinds of recognisable characteristics per se. Inequality comes from characteristics that affect how we see and respond to someone's social standing<sup>33</sup>. A team of ten with two groups of five from two different cultures is just as balanced, but not as heterogeneous as a group of ten people all from different nationalities. However, if those ten nationalities are intrinsically accorded different levels of importance (eg: we three are from the European headquarters and therefore we automatically understand more than that Moroccan lady who only comes from a small production unit) then inequalities (perceived or actual) will skew the interaction. Three categories are useful when looking at the effect of inequalities in international teams. There are those that arise from having more of one nationality

present – structural inequality, those that arise from different levels of language fluency – linguistic inequalities and those that arise from perceptions of power and influence – perceived inequalities.

Suppose there are five people of one nationality and two of another, what happens to notions like equal participation? The most useful thinking on this comes from Rosabeth Moss Kanter who described teams as uniform, skewed, tilted and balanced<sup>34</sup>. A uniform team would have members who are all from one nationality; skewed teams have a token different one or two people, tilted teams have unequal subgroups and balanced teams have equal numbers of different people.

Skewed teams are the least 'balanced'. Token individuals tend to be treated as invisible, excluded or are assimilated into the overriding norms of the group. The extent of a minority's influence in a skewed team has been shown to depend on their negotiation style, the degree to which they differ from the majority and whether the 'zeitgeist' is favourable or unfavourable (eg the real rather than espoused attitude of the company towards diversity)<sup>35</sup>.

International teams are by definition never uniform across cultures, but they are also rarely balanced. Skews and tilts invariably exacerbate national and linguistic differences. The impact of structural and linguistic inequalities on international teamwork are demonstrated in depth in the next chapter.

*There are no simple solutions for dealing with preconceptions and inequalities in perceived power*

A third type of inequality comes from preconceptions and stereotypes about the superiority and inferiority of one's own and others' nationalities. In the late seventies, groups in the International Labour Organisation in Turin were asked to rank countries according to their stereotypes, before working together<sup>36</sup>. 'Members judged as most qualified were always coming from countries which were judged the most developed and economically strong.' The same ranking test was applied at the end of the course 'when people had the opportunity to substitute real experience for personal stereotypes' and no statistical ranking was found. Despite this modification of stereotypes, other important observations created by the imbalance of power were made:

- The phenomenon of 'initiation' will be shorter for the 'foreign worker' as the characteristics of his/her nationality are automatically attributed.
- Aggressive behaviour of an authoritarian supervisor provoked other group members in response to 'discharge' on the 'lowest' national status members.
- Leadership, cliques and sub-grouping will follow the same rules based on national status if no corrective forces are present to modify the trend.
- Rationality plays a much smaller part than the emotions in a person's attitude toward foreigners.

Preconceptions and ignorance about other team member's expertise and

usefulness will determine how much each person finally contributes and the general attitude that greets each person's response. These perceptions are usually a mixture of positive and negative and so need careful diagnosis. Each individual in the team is likely to be selective about which parts of someone else's contributions and behaviour they like and which parts irritate and annoy them.

*Initial clarity of roles and responsibilities and exploration of different skills, knowledge and the meaning of power sharing can go a long way in levelling the playing field*

Despite the alienating and negative effects of perceived or real superiority in international teams, it is seldom addressed in depth. It is usually deemed politically incorrect to raise it as an issue, and so as demonstrated in the next chapter, it is left to wreak its havoc while everyone tries to deny it exists. Balance this against oft-quoted prescriptions for international teams such as 'create equal power' and team leaders should appreciate the need first, to understand it and second to do something about it as suggested in Chapter Four.

In thinking about imbalances in the team, international team leaders need to remember that:

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- **Team leaders and members have to be aware that structural, linguistic and perceived inequalities can be far more dysfunctional than cultural differences per se.**
  - **There are no simple solutions for dealing with preconceptions and inequalities in perceived power.**
  - **Initial clarity of roles and responsibilities and exploration of different skills, knowledge and the meaning of power sharing can go a long way in levelling the playing field.**
- 

## **7 The geographic spread of the team members**

*Plot the team's geographical and temporal spread and the different levels of infrastructure and think through the consequences for the team's distant interaction*

*'The trouble is if a problem crops up after lunchtime, it has to wait until the next day as my project leader is in the UK and is at home by then – that does slow things down.'*

International teams are often dispersed across time zones and geographical distances as well as across cultural ones. The useful concepts of skew, tilt and

balance can apply again. In a tilted team, most of the team are in one place with a spread of scattered 'outliers'. In a skewed team, all but one of the team are in the same place. In a balanced team all the team would be equally spread out.

The challenge in tilted and skewed geographic teams is to keep the outliers feeling as involved as the rest of the team, especially at key points of the task. A small transatlantic team had one British team member. The team relied on phone, fax and courier services to exchange data. As deadlines approached, there was increasing reluctance to involve the UK outlier in anything but comments on almost complete drafts. There was not the time or technology to create ways of brainstorming and arguing through the underlying logic and messages that the team as a whole wanted to portray. This undid any sense of teamwork that may have been established.

Meanwhile in thinking about the geographic spread, international team leaders need to

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- ***Plot the team's geographical and temporal spread and the different levels of infrastructure and think through the consequences for the team's distant interaction.***
  - ***Follow the best practices laid out in Chapter Six.***
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### **8 The similarity or difference between functional, corporate and other 'cultures' (Ethnic and gender)**

A recent survey of 15,000 British CEO's<sup>37</sup> showed 52 per cent to be registered chartered accountants, unlike France, where engineers would be more likely to predominate. Different functions will be held in different levels of regard.

*'they think that because they are medics that they rule the roost, well they don't know about statistics.'*

In Fiat, the Italian motor company, the staff managers involved in strategic planning, procurement, sales and marketing, and human resources tend to have more power than the operational managers running the factories. Not so in many UK companies, where human resources is often regarded as the function that comes along after the real work has been decided on.

Some authors assert that 'similar educational experiences can erase ideological differences' such that 'those within the same profession tend to espouse similar values regardless of nationality'<sup>38</sup>. Aside from having different standings in a company, different functions can be shown to have different priorities and value sets, similar to individual cultural differences. 'Cultural' dimensions have emerged to measure and describe differences in organisational and functional cultures<sup>39</sup>. A quick study in one Finnish company showed that finance was 'tight' while research was 'loose'. Production was more parochial than sales who emerged as more

'professionally' oriented. The new corporate identity espoused a process/people orientation where most functions still emerged as results and job oriented.

*Similarity in other areas can lessen the affect of national differences, just as differences can add to the complexity*

One team that was persuaded to focus less on their national differences and more on the fact that they were all statisticians together, stopped arguing and began to set a clear path towards working together. Yet, if an international team is also cross functional, the possible complexity and potential misunderstanding greatly increases.

*'Sometimes they use jargon that I don't understand – I think it is just to show off and to make me feel stupid.'*

Functional languages based on technical terms, idioms, abbreviations and jargon can be as diverse and as unintelligible to an outsider as national languages. Mice, bugs and viruses in computers, love, charm and quarks in physics are words that bear little relationship to their original contexts. 'ROIs', 'APRs', 'ROEs', 'PL sheets', are abbreviations that roll off accountant's tongues as if everyone automatically knows what they stand for. These differences reinforce the fact that cross-national, cross-functional teams will have an added dimension of differences, especially with different functions also being at different stages of internationalisation as described in Chapter One.

*Team leaders and members need to explore all sources of similarity and diversity in the team and understand which ones will be most influential in that particular organisational context*

*'It is great having all the different functions on the team – you realise how much talent there is there.'*

*'Even though we are all supposed to have an equal role on the team, some of the team members have a "we're better than you" attitude – you see it in the way they miss you off e-mail distribution lists – as if I did not need to know what they are talking about.'*

The relative amount of influence that different nationalities or functions will have on the team dynamics is dependent on the context of the team and what the team members are expected to bring to the teamwork. In thinking about the impact of functional differences or similarities within the team, an international team leader needs to remember that:

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- *There are useful ways of categorising differences in organisational and functional cultures.*
  - *The results should be used with the same caution as national norms.*
  - *Similarity in other areas can lessen the affect of national differences, just as differences can add to the complexity.*
  - *Team leaders and members need to explore all sources of similarity and diversity in the team and understand which ones will be most influential in that organisational context.*
- 

### **Summary of Key Learning Points**

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*The team leader needs to understand these eight sources of similarity and difference in depth in order to anticipate and act on areas of difficulty. They can also use the findings as a checklist against which to try and understand the underlying basis for difficulties within his or her team. To sum up, the eight factors are:*

#### **Cultural factors**

- 1. The degrees of difference or similarity that exist between the cultural norms of the individuals in the team.*
- 2. The degree to which individuals might manifest their cultural norms.*
- 3. Differences in language fluency, communication patterns, non verbals and who says what when.*
- 4. Culturally different leadership styles.*
- 5. The different expectations about key team processes.*

#### **Organisational factors**

- 6. The status of different cultures within the organisation.*
- 7. The geographic spread of the team members.*
- 8. The similarity or difference between functional, professional and other 'cultures'.*

*The important issue is to be prepared, to have the ability to analyse a situation if it does arise, and to know that something quite different may actually take place. It is a bit like scenario planning. You have to mentally imagine*

***all the possible scenarios of what could hijack the team's effectiveness and ensure that, from the start, you establish key patterns of interaction and ground rules that will prevent dysfunctional behaviour. If team leaders and members are not already persuaded to do this by some tough experiences, then the next chapter describes some of the impact of these factors on real international teams.***

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