

Chapter Three

The Impact of Inequalities

*'The companies which succeed in being global will be those which best understand how to manage diversity.'*¹

The previous chapter explored eight factors that affect international teams. The objective of this chapter is to illustrate the powerful role that national representation, language, stereotypes and perceived and real status differences have in determining who leads and talks the most in international teams. These three types of inequality can exacerbate or diminish the importance of cultural differences and create dysfunctional power plays within a team. This chapter tells real stories and details the research findings from twenty-seven international teams videoed in Western Europe and East and South East Asia.²

Cultural differences rarely play out on an equal playing field and this applies to differences in organisational, functional and ethnic cultures as much as to differences in nationality. Differences in power, wealth, economic and educational levels, for instance, often underscore cultural differences.

Minority/majority dynamics often dominate intercultural exchange to a far greater degree than cultural differences in world views, communication and behavioural styles per se.

Differences such as age, job status, gender, length of tenure, motivation, reward, knowledge and skills create inequalities in all teams, including international teams. They need to be managed well to prevent them from being dysfunctional. If you take job status, when Seagram set up its re-engineering teams, one motto was 'leave your stripes at the door'. It was clearly harder for the mostly Japanese team.

'In Japan, the problem is that grading is seen to be a major barrier, therefore in order to overcome this behaviour, I had to tell the junior members to be more aggressive and mostly everyday to enforce that the team is independent, that there are no grades, that everybody is responsible for the results of the team.'

In the operational teams (as opposed to ad hoc training teams) in the in-depth video research, the amount one person spoke was clearly influenced by managerial level.

'What really bugs me is people thinking that they can use the fact that they have letters after their name to pull rank.'

'It was difficult in the beginning to engage the more junior members in the discussion as the more senior members were overpowering them.'

In one meeting to develop strategy, the managers talked the most about overall strategy, while the personal assistants spoke less and when they did, they focused on their operational difficulties and the communication between each other. They kept being reminded by the managers that this was not the purpose of the meeting.

Similarities or different personalities may also sometimes override cultural differences in international teams. In one ad hoc training team, the only apparent explanation for a Turkish man being shunned seemed to be that the rest of the team did not like him, even though, according to him, he had the most experience on the task. His measured personality type* was different from the three dominant team members. Otherwise over the whole video research, there was no significant relationship between personality type** and the amount any one contributed.

So while the same issues of job status, tenure, age, gender, personality will affect international teams as much as national teams (although probably each one in different degrees in different nationalities), there are the three kinds of inequality that specifically affect international teams more than national teams; inequality arising from the composition of the team, inequality arising from different levels of fluency with the working language and inequality arising from perceived differences in power and status. However great cultural differences are, the interaction that is set up by unequally distributed power based on the three factors often overshadows them.

Structural Inequality and Size

As mentioned in Chapter Two, except in the UN, World Bank and a few regional functional teams, very few teams are completely heterogeneous, eg one representative from a wide range of nationalities. Some may be balanced (five French, five Japanese) but not very heterogeneous. A recent piece of research shows that over time, teams of four that are totally heterogeneous, do just as well on a variety of performance indicators as homogeneous teams. Both these types of team do better than balanced but less heterogeneous teams. (eg two US, two UK)³. Although the research did not explore it, we suspect that skewed teams (eg three US, one UK) are likely to do even worse again.

It is proposed that the determining factor is the extent to which the team members can create an 'us' and 'them' situation. If everyone is different, it is

* As measured by Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

** Again as measured by the four Myers Briggs dimensions.

hard for such in-group identities to form and it is more likely that the team will form its own 'culture' and work well together, just like a nationally homogeneous team. If you have a balanced team of two each, then you are more likely to have two sub-teams with two distinct 'subcultures' that may have difficulty integrating. In a 'skewed' team, the majority of three is likely to dominate the one sole member who will be expected to 'fit in'.

The problem with the above research is that, like much experimental team research, it takes place on courses in business schools where real organisational influences are missing. In an American organisation, as opposed to international business school, if a team consisted of an American, French, Venezuelan and Nigerian, the chances are that the American will be the leader, be perceived to have more power and will, consciously or unconsciously, be expected to 'set the norms'.

In the video research, even when there were three Malaysians and two Dutch, as the company was Anglo-Dutch, the Dutch members assumed control.

So while the numbers of different nationalities in an international team can lead to one nationality numerically dominating the others, the power within the organisation may mean that a minority will in fact dominate. Similarly having more people from the same nationality as the leadership of the company (called here the dominant culture) meant that people from that nationality talked more and were perceived to be significantly more involved and to have had more influence than other people in the team. This organisational dominance often hijacks many international teams striving for 'equal participation', before they even get started.

The message is that the interaction and play of power in skewed teams, especially those that favour people from the same nationality as the leadership of the company, needs to be proactively managed.

Small is beautiful

Much experimental research uses teams of four. Our field research range covered teams of four to thirteen.

The results suggest that small is beautiful if you want to get your point across in an international team.

The most balanced and satisfied teams were of four and five people respectively, noticeably with one or no mother tongue speakers to dominate the airspace. The most balanced team of four was composed of two Malaysians

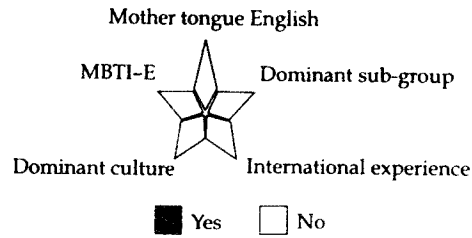


Figure 3.1: Key to the meaning of the stars

and two Dutch (one born in Nigeria). The 'satisfied' team of five was composed of one Australian, one Omani, one Norwegian and Two Malaysians. In both teams, it was discovered that a Malaysian had the most experience relevant to the task.

In the smallest team, only 5 per cent of all the contributions were started when someone else was still talking, in other words, the rate of interruption was low. In some of the larger teams, especially those with more British members than any other nationality, interruption rates reached 39 per cent of all contributions made. In this research, especially in a Western context, the bigger the teams became, the more some people spoke much more than others as Figures 3.2 and 3.3 show.

These Figures represent ad hoc training teams with no pre-appointed leaders and with people of more or less similar level within the organisation. On the left-hand vertical axis is the percentage of total contribution made by each person (a star represents a person). The different arms of the stars show (clockwise):

- if a person is a mother tongue speaker;
- if they belong to a numerically larger subgroup;
- if they have had previous international experience or not;
- if they belong to the same nationality as the leadership of the organisation;
- if they are an extrovert as measured by the Myers Briggs personality test (missing in the middle team).

If an arm is shaded, it means yes, if blank it means no. All five factors were expected to contribute to someone participating more in an international team. Overall, being an extrovert and belonging to a numerically larger subgroup had no significant effect. The other findings are discussed throughout this chapter.

Coming back to size, the closer what we called the 'participation balance' score is to zero, the more everyone contributed the same amount. In the team of four, as second language speakers, they all contributed almost equally. In a team of seven, with four mother tongue speakers, the range is from 22 per cent to 7 per cent. In the team of nine, with seven mother tongue speakers, the range was from 20 per cent to 1 per cent.

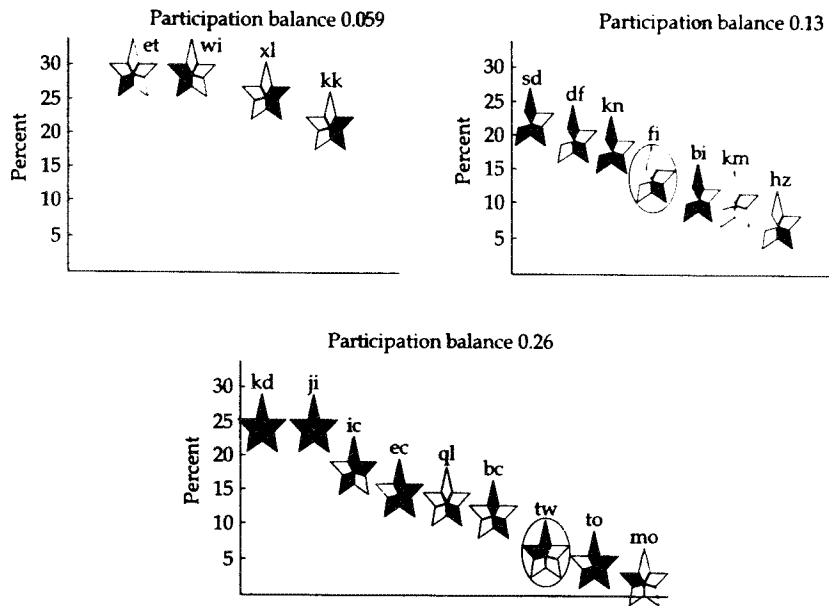


Figure 3.2: Examples of participation patterns in international teams

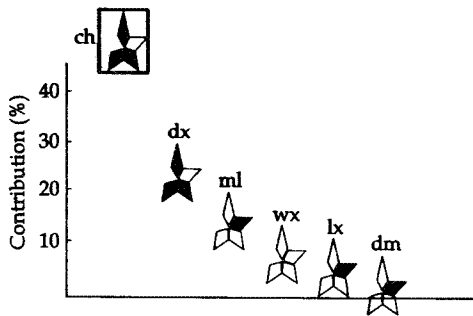


Figure 3.3: Participation patterns in a Hong Kong team

A circle shows the person who was appointed as the team leader after the team started, called the 'emergent' leader as opposed to a 'pre-appointed' leader. It was only in teams of seven and above that an emergent leader was appointed, mostly to manage the process, not the content of the task. Below seven, nobody seemed to feel the need. To sum up, in these Western based teams, the smaller the team, the more they spoke the same amount and the more satisfied they were. However in Hong Kong, less balanced participation did not affect the level of satisfaction.

Figure 3.3 shows an operational team in Hong Kong. The pre-appointed leader has a square. She made 52 per cent of all contributions while a Hong Kong Chinese team member made 1 per cent. The interruption rate was very low, around 1.5 per cent of total contributions. Despite the great difference in the amount people

spoke, all the teams in Hong Kong were just as satisfied as Western based teams of similar size. All the conversation was directed by and through the pre-appointed leader (in this case an American) so it seems the formality of this process was accepted. In fact, many Chinese will say 'why waste your breath shouting out'? As mentioned in the last chapter, culturally appropriate leadership is important.

Summing up on ideal size, it seems it is much easier to involve everyone in small teams of four or five than in larger teams, especially when there are more mother tongue speakers. If the team is large, breaking up into smaller groups for key discussion will probably increase the participation of second language speakers. It was noticeable that one or two Malaysians spoke significantly more in the whole teams after they had fed back the discussions of their subgroups. It seemed that being able to share their expertise in a smaller group gave them the confidence to speak up in the larger group.

In order to manage structural inequalities, team leaders need to:

- ***Wherever possible create highly heterogeneous teams and avoid very skewed teams.***
- ***Wherever possible create small teams of four or five, especially if they are supposed to be self managed teams. If the team is large and the task involves using everyone's expertise to the full rather than gathering bits of information, split into subgroups (that lessen the inequality) at strategic brainstorming points.***
- ***Proactively manage the patterns of linguistic and perceived dominance (described below) that are likely to exacerbate the numerical inequalities.***

Unequal Language Ability and Interruption and Patterns of Logic

Choosing the working language

One international consortium of top HR managers and business teachers started to talk about Japanese appraisal systems. An American academic professor jumped up to explain all about them. After much sign language from the back row, the chairman finally asked the one Japanese company representative to speak. His English was very hard to understand, but he did slowly put forward a few very different points of view. When time is short and expensive, do you let an American talk at speed for everyone (and still call yourself an international consortium?) or do you listen patiently, arrange for someone to translate and access different points of view?

A huge amount of research and skill has gone into the art of simultaneous translation, in being able to translate the intended meaning as well as the words. It is very impressive, necessary and/or often insisted upon in inter-governmental meetings and diplomacy. It usually leads to people making speeches at one another so that all the heated arguments and draft decisions are hammered out in small working groups behind the scenes. Formal translation is too impractical for most operational teams in large companies; especially where humour can play a large part in building comfort zones. With simultaneous translation, one half always gets the jokes when the other half has already laughed and moved on. So the first task of an international team is to decide on the working language.

For most Western based companies and increasingly others as well, this is predominantly English. As one American international team member put it, '*Basically my French sucks*'. In joint ventures, we have seen a CEO declaring in Italian that English is the working language (even though he was unable to speak English). In another, an Italian director (speaking with his eyes closed) quashed a young English manager's desire to learn Italian (because it was not the declared working language of the joint venture). The choice of language can have a very large impact on the outcome of negotiations and decisions. One international group found that their German boss seemed to become much more generous and forgiving when they talked with her in English than in Hochdeutsch.

Declaring, like a small Finnish based marine engineering company, MacGregor-Navire, that everyone must be able to speak in English, is probably only possible in smaller companies and perhaps also those based in countries like Finland and Holland where many people are schooled to be multilingual. Otherwise the reality in many companies is pockets of different languages, the need to translate much company wide information and varying degrees of frustration. When computer interfaces are in local languages, itinerant international managers find that they cannot log on if they have not taken their own PC with them. Thankfully for many, not only have there been some significant recent breakthroughs in Japan with computerised translation technology, but also personal communicators are now becoming the size of mobile phones.

One irony is that although similar languages are easier to learn, they can often cause the most problem as words are translated literally that actually mean something else. For instance 'actualité' in French means 'currently', not 'actually', société is a company as well as a society, fusion is a merger as well as a scientific process, and concretisation is an actual French word that many think must be the same in English. One author recently picked up a prize-winning American book on teams and was lost when it came to 'Japan coming at America', 'they cleaned our clock' and 'team blowhards'. Because they are unexpected, many awkward and funny misunderstandings take place between American and British team members.

Once the working language is decided, offering language training that teaches not only the words, but also the concepts, values, beliefs and norms in which the language is embedded is important. In GEC Alsthom⁴ a 50/50 French/English merger, the initial training needs analysis underestimated the ability to listen in each other's language as well as to talk and write. It is often easier to understand than to speak. Sometimes it can work best to run a workshop where for instance, the participants talk in Italian and the facilitators reply in English. Whatever language is chosen, mother tongue speakers have a huge advantage and their communication norms will probably dominate.

'English language speakers did sometimes use the fact to their advantage to "wire" a debate.'

The 'interrupting' English Speakers

Some of the results of video research were gathered by counting how much each individual spoke.

Predictably this showed that mother tongue English speakers spoke more than second language speakers.

Presumably they can think and speak faster in their first language. Moreover, English and Americans often started to talk when someone else was still talking. This can make it hard for others to say what they want, when they want to. One team of peers were all mother tongue English speakers of sorts (British, American, Canadian and Australian). The only perceivable cultural difference was that when Americans started talking at the same time as someone else, they invariably went on to finish their sentences even if no one else was listening. The British team members on the other hand would give up mid sentence.

In one British company, four teams were working to create new aspects of strategy. Each team had more British managers than any other one nationality. They invariably talked more than the other participants did. The overall rates of interruption* were the highest of all teams hovering around 40 per cent of all the contributions made. However, it was not just the British team members who interrupted, the results surprisingly showed that this pattern of high interruption drove *everyone* to interrupt, mother tongue and second language speakers alike. Sure enough, team members in these teams felt that everyone had expressed their views much less than in linguistically more heterogeneous teams, even though this did not significantly affect the levels of satisfaction.

* Technically for interruption read 'starting to talk when someone else is talking'. It depends on how it is perceived by the person already talking as to whether it is an interruption or not.

In these four teams, Indian, Pakistani, and Malawian team members spoke and interrupted as much as the British. This was significantly more than the 'continental' Europeans (Dutch, German, French,) who also rated themselves as fluent in English. Indian, Pakistani and Malawian team members are more likely to work in English as a business language in their own countries, may well have been schooled in English, and so be able to interrupt at speed. In one of these teams, a fluent Dutchman gave up as the pace got too much. Immediately after the team broke up, he cornered the most senior person and animatedly poured out all his frustrated thinking on the topic.

The research also showed that second language speakers with previous international experience spoke more than those without.

As one Hong Kong Chinese man working in a British owned bank in Hong Kong put it:

'When I went to Australia, I had to learn to interrupt or else I would never have spoken at all.'

Previous international experience had no effect on the amount mother tongue English speakers spoke. Presumably they were in any case dominating the airspace as much as they wanted to.

The video research also showed that the rate of interruption increased as the team was about to take a decision and would fall off dramatically once the decision was made and team members were carefully thinking through the implications.

This means that unless the interaction leading up to decisions is consciously structured to include everyone, second language speakers are more likely to be excluded at these key moments.

Americans in the top team of an Italian/American acquisition complained that the larger group of Italian managers would even revert to Italian when decisions were about to be made. The Italians would then politely translate after the issue had been resolved. Needless to say, the Americans felt disenfranchised and like extras 'at a theatre play'.

A team in a highly profitable telecommunications company comprised of two Finns, Carola and Pekka, a Korean, Mr Lee, a French-Swiss, a Swiss, an Englishman living in Spain and Peter, a 'Geordie' from the borders of Scotland and England. When asked to review their experiences using a team review questionnaire*, everybody wrote that they had enjoyed the four-month project except the two Finns. This shocked some of the other members as the Finns had said nothing.

When asked what was wrong, the Finns replied that the others (aside from Mr Lee, the Korean) had kept interrupting them. This, despite being warned when their team was formed some months before of the dangers of allowing a lot of interruption. Pekka observed that he had protested at one meeting by staying silent the entire meeting, but nobody had noticed. When asked why they had not said anything, they suggested that it was not normal in Finnish culture to verbally complain and hence show others up.

A small study recording how much each person was talking in the team revealed that Mr Lee, the Korean, was saying much less than anyone else, including the two Finns. He was a very experienced senior director, who spoke English carefully and slowly. When he did speak, he made insightful comments, so the team soon learnt to stop and listen to what he had to say. Even though he spoke the least number of times, he was satisfied with his participation because he was listened to and his ideas were taken up. The two Finns however, on average, spoke more, but were constantly interrupted. On the whole, Finnish people prefer an orderly pattern of interaction where you give time to think after each speaker. The pattern of constant interruption set up by the two British people and followed by the other Europeans excluded them.

As facilitators, we learnt three important lessons:

- ***People will sometimes write what they will not say.***
 - ***Team reviews need to be done during the teamwork, not just at the end.***
 - ***However much you warn a team of the pitfalls of interruption and different communication styles, they do not really get the message until it happens to them.***
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There was a short sequel.

*Developed for the session and administered by Claudia Heimer, Ashridge Consulting Group.

Some months after the team broke up, Peter, the Geordie was surprised when Pekka rang him in his hotel and asked him to go drinking with him. He had presumed that Pekka had taken a personal dislike to him, but in fact no grudge was held and they became good friends.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Japanese workers also talk a lot at the same time in Japanese, but for different reasons. It is hardly surprising that many Japanese people will wait for a clear pause or even to be asked to speak in international teams working in English. However, when reflecting on the videoed teamwork, it was predominantly the British who criticised their teams most heavily for not encouraging everyone to express their views. Although their own behaviour caused the problem, they did nothing about it at the time. The inability to prevent such dysfunctional momentum is why most international teams need someone to manage the interaction until team members learn how to do it themselves.

Coping with different patterns of logic

Even when the fact that they had talked more and may belong to the dominant organisational culture was taken into account, mother tongue speakers were still perceived to have had more influence on the teamwork and to have been more involved than second language speakers. One strong impression from the video research was that second language speakers tended to be reduced to offering *examples* from their experience and 'bright ideas', rather than driving the underlying *logic* or framework of the discussion. By driving the underlying logic, we mean the person who takes the lead in clarifying with the team what they need to do. It is usually the person who makes the statement, 'Well then, this is what we need to do next' and who intermittently summarises where the team has reached to and again, what they should be doing next. In only one team was this person a second language speaker. She spoke English completely fluently as well as other languages, and had wide and long international experience.

One Japanese writer, Magorah Maruyama⁵ has talked about four categories of different types of logic or 'mindscapes'. He then describes how each 'type' will approach management, decision making differently and have different values and attitudes towards cause and effect. As mentioned in Chapter Two, scholars have suggested that the realistic pictorial base of Chinese and Japanese languages makes abstract thinking much harder than for those brought up in more conceptually based languages. While it is not hard to imagine that

culturally predominant patterns of logic and thinking will make life hard for some people in an international team, given everything else also going on, it is not easy to demonstrate. Out of all the research, one instance sticks out that invites that kind of interpretation.

After six hours of teamwork on creating a base case for drilling an offshore oil well, Amin, a Malaysian proposed that the team think about the more expensive newer technology of horizontal drilling. He was met with a sharp retort 'We work on that kind of thing way down the line. Do you understand what we are doing here and how we have to go about this problem.' Eighteen hours later, the course leader came in and asked if they had considered horizontal drilling which by then, everyone had forgotten about. They then worked out that in fact it would make much better use of the excess gas, rendering the proposed gas line unnecessary and greatly increase the productivity of the site. They reworked the figures and technology.

Without more data, it is hard to say whether Amin made an out of place suggestion. Perhaps because he was Malaysian, they did not consider his suggestion important. On the other hand it is possible that because he was not stuck in a pattern of logic that said you have to do 'x' before you can think about 'y', he was able to include an option far earlier in his thinking. It certainly seemed that it would have saved the whole team much time and effort if they had kept his suggestion as a running possibility instead of dismissing it so sharply.

Each language and cultural mindset will determine and to some extent probably mirror, the way problems are usually solved in that culture. You build up a picture around an initial input from a senior member in Japanese. You argue different theoretical positions until you find the 'truth' in German or English.

Many people may be fluent in the *words* of another language, but it is a different level of fluency to also be able to restructure *the way we understand and think* a problem through.

Other languages often do not lend themselves to explaining the different ways of seeing things. The whole feeling and concept behind words like 'Hutzpah' in Yiddish, 'Muzza' in Urdu, 'zeitgeist' in German just don't translate well into English. If finding words to express the whole texture and implications of the pictures in our heads is hard in our own language, then for second language speakers, whole pieces may well be missing. Even though a fluent second language speaker may talk as much as a first language speaker in a team, it may be that often the type of contribution is different, even constrained to filling in with examples and bright ideas. This is an area that needs much more in-depth research. Meanwhile, international teams can probably benefit much from

developing creative ways of seeing things differently. Drawing is a good place to start.

The type of task also seems to make a difference. If a second language speaker was identified as having more knowledge on a task that involved calculation, and the pace was slow enough, they were usually rated as having the most influence, even though they had not talked the most. This was never the case in teams working on tasks that needed value judgements and different ways of looking at the problem to come to a new perspective. Yet these are the very tasks where diversity should be the most helpful. In these less structured tasks, dominant groups seem to like to maintain a pattern and type of interaction that stayed within their realms of comfort.

'Certainly at the beginning we learned to ask them directly for their input so they could add value at their language pace.'

'The French team member was hard to get out of his shell because of his shyness with the language and adversity to politics. We stuck at it and out came the issue.'

'All team members spoke excellent English so this was not really a problem. The Chinese had a tendency to huddle in a corner and speak Cantonese, which was kind of annoying, but if it was a work conversation, eventually one of them would translate.'

To summarise, as GEC Alstom managers discovered, 'lack of linguistic ability is not an indicator of intelligence'. Many mother tongue speakers, especially those unable to speak other languages, tend to forget this unless they themselves have been in the minority situation. In order to avoid the bias brought about by linguistic dominance, predominant communication patterns and maybe patterns of logic, international teams need to:

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- **Slow down.**
 - **Be careful about interruption patterns.**
 - **Remove idiomatic phrases.**
 - **Be aware of multiple or ambiguous meanings.**
 - **Breaking complex ideas down into a series of simple ones.**
 - **Check and recheck understanding, often by asking the same question a number of different ways.**
 - **Seriously consider what seem like off the wall untimely suggestions.**
 - **Ensure that the pattern of interaction and decision making is including everyone.**
 - **Give time out to talk in mother tongues so that people can explore and define what they want to say and paraphrase it back into the working language.**
 - **Use pictures, diagrams or stories to come at something from different angles.**
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Preconceptions, Prejudices and Stereotypes

One team in an Anglo/Dutch multinational* consisted of three British males, Tom, Paul and Gordon, one male Turk, Hakim, one male Omani, Soyul, one female Malaysian, Ashraf and one male Nigerian, Mwenesi. The task was to evaluate the amount of raw mineral available in a certain geographic area. Three minutes after sitting down, Tom, one of the British males asks in a non-specific way 'Are we going to elect a chair? Soyul replies 'Yes you' and so Tom assumes the leadership role without consulting anyone else. He then interpreted his role as explaining to everyone else what they had to do.

After half an hour, Ashraf, the Malaysian woman asks 'Shall we split into subgroups?' Tom replies 'well it would be pretty stupid to sit and watch one person draw straight lines on a graph all afternoon'. Then turning to Paul he asks 'So what shall we do?' Paul suggests that they split into subgroups, each pair taking different parts of a large chart. This they do. Tom makes sure that Soyul and himself take the top half of the chart and Paul the bottom half and he suggests that Hakim and Mwenesi take the middle. Gordon quickly joins Paul working on the bottom half, leaving Ashraf looking over Hakim's shoulder as he worked with Mwenesi. The almost self-elected British leader had made sure that a British person was working on each important end of the chart. Later on, Ashraf asked if they could write up on the flipchart what it is that they want to achieve and how they are going to do it. Tom impatiently retorted that it was easy and counted on his fingers the three things he thought they should achieve. At the same time he starts qualifying what he is saying and so Ashraf starts writing it down for herself, repeating it for clarification as she writes and questioning the assumptions that Tom is making. The course leader later questioned the same assumptions and the team had to rework some of the calculations.

In some other teams, when a British person did not like what was going on or felt excluded, they tended to withdraw. However Ashraf, who all along had been asking pertinent and intelligent questions, stayed with the team despite the derogatory behaviour she received. She progressively changed her tone. She soon opted for beginning her sentences with expressions such as 'what do you think if' and 'is it a useful suggestion if we'. As a result, she maintained her influence in the team. To the British observer, she handled conflict in a subtle and masterful way, even though she vented her frustration in private at the end

* It should be stated that both the most balanced, satisfied and least satisfied teams were all found in this company; one of six in the research.

of the session. It was not the amount of participation that led to dissatisfaction, but the way in which her participation was viewed and received.

At no time did any of the team members say, 'because you are a Muslim Malaysian woman wearing a head scarf, I do not value your input as much as my British male colleague here'. However, certainly the impression given to the observer was that these three 'differences' (Muslim Malaysian woman different from Christian, Anglo-Dutch male) were not being treated neutrally. They appeared to consign her to being perceived as less competent, and hence some of her input being treated facetiously.

It would be dangerous to assume that one woman's experience is demonstrating a company-wide prejudice about different nationalities, women or religious beliefs. However, other indications of something amiss came in comments from other teams in the same company such as about Amin, 'He is not bad for a Malaysian, he actually talks'. In other teams there were comments like, 'If we have anything left over, we'll send it to Nigeria' which was followed by laughter from the English and Dutch team members. Having been at odds with the only Nigerian in the team, a Norwegian commented afterwards 'the Nigerian way of repeating every point made by either themselves or others hampered the team effectiveness. This also tends to focus the time and attention on irrelevant details instead of getting the job done'. One Kenyan Asian found that he was spoken to slowly and loudly even after Europeans had heard (but perhaps not listened to) his elegant bi-lingual mother tongue English. In a team with two Dutch and three Malaysians, a Dutch man walked in saying 'I know all the answers and it is very simple'. He then adopted the role of 'teacher on call' to the rest of the team.

Some people might argue that 'lower status' individuals participate less because they are unconsciously fulfilling their own lower expectations. Their lower participation is not because a prevailing norm is being imposed but because of their own low self esteem and so on. There was no evidence from the in-depth questionnaires prior to and after the video research that individuals from non-dominant cultures or second language speakers, expected to participate less than the other members. Ashraf and one other did mark their expectation of being listened to slightly lower than the team average. However, there was no sign that this decreased their attempts at active participation. Perhaps Ashraf was being pragmatic based on her previous experiences.

If allowing prejudices to work implicitly can cause problems, so can their explicit misuse. In four teams where the 'dominant' culture was British, there was a need to establish who was going to do the final presentation. The British members suggested folding small pieces of paper, drawing a cross on one and having team members pick one at random. Malay, Nigerian and Latin American members expressed strong discomfort and concern with this method of selection. In each case, the criticism was dismissed with a joke about this being the 'British way of doing things' and the process was pushed through

without discussing any alternatives. When the cross fell to one Nigerian, he simply refused to present. His argument was that the most experienced person would give the best presentation for the team. In the minds of the British, joking about national differences made it okay to push through one particular way of doing things and to override any objections.

Throughout sixty-four hours of teamwork in nine teams in this one company; Europeans made stereotypical comments about Malaysians and Nigerians. Europeans made no stereotypical comments about other Europeans or Middle Eastern members. No Middle Eastern, African or South East Asian members made any stereotypical comments about anyone else.

The way these team members used stereotypes seemed to follow the common ranking of the developed world (eg; Europe) at the top, 'newly industrialised' (eg Middle East and South East Asia) in the middle and the 'developing world' (eg Africa) at the bottom.

Whether they reflect a company wide norm or not, these findings should be setting off warning bells in many Western based established multinationals.

The video research showed that overall, members of these 'dominant' organisational culture(s) within the organisation were perceived to have had more influence on the team than other nationalities, *regardless of the amount they talked*.

For instance, in teams where *all* the team members were second language speakers, the role of keeping a running commentary on what the team had done so far and what they should do next, usually fell to someone from the 'dominant' organisational culture who was perceived to be more influential.

If a sense that one nationality is dominant, regardless of talent, pervades an organisation, then individuals from other cultures will probably recognise that their careers are best served by playing *down* their own national identities and fitting in as much as possible. Individuals from the dominant culture will likewise gain more from reinforcing their own culture rather than trying to empathise or incorporate other cultures. The organisation will not be operating as internationally as a passport count may at first suggest. Only strong messages and actions from the top can change this.

Cross-cultural training usually addresses differences in communication styles and behavioural norms in a light-hearted way to get people to appreciate and work with such differences. However, all our work implies that patterns of dominance and stereotyping can have a much more profound dysfunctional effect on international teams than culturally different behaviours and communication styles. In our experience, differences are seldom perceived as equal.

However, if managers start to talk about inequalities, as opposed to 'neutral' differences, many people become very nervous.

A CEO described his company as 'international, with the soul of the mother country'. Even so, a senior manager had identified the effect of a dominant culture as a key barrier to the very successful company being truly (and in his mind, equitably) international. He suggested along with others that non-dominant managers were not sure of their prospects and felt undermined when the decision making power kept returning to the mother country. There was talk of a national Mafia.

The opportunity arose to put this down on slides and include it in a presentation to the CEO and Board about key challenges to the company. One non-dominant national bravely wrote the slides and did a practice run with a senior management programme. After he had finished, there was a stony silence. Prompts from the facilitator for comments did nothing. In the end, the facilitator begged for a translation of the silence. One person spoke up suggesting the word Mafia might be removed. Most agreed and after much more silence there was a grudging show of hands that the non national should go ahead having made this modification. The minute the meeting broke up he was mobbed at the door and told that his job could be on the line if he did go ahead. Why, he was wondering, was he bothering to stick his neck out. For a 'non-national' to criticise the dominant culture was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a threat to his job.

Some companies may be actively working to root out these kinds of prejudices because they are offensive to some sense of meritocracy, mutual respect and undermine international survival. Most others will have presumably recognised that despite the hiccups in South East Asia, the global economy is changing. Only ten years ago, India, China and Vietnam were written off as uninteresting developing countries, now investors are eager to gain entry.

Ashraf's case testifies that unless dominance manifests in recognisable extremes of racist or stereotypical statements, it is very hard to prove or to get people to take it seriously. Senior management as well as team leaders and members need to be proactive in role-modelling the open international attitudes that they wish to see prevail throughout the company and in tackling prejudices head on. Techniques to challenge these stereotypical perceptions and feedback dysfunctional behaviour in a non-judgmental way are explored in the next two chapters.

In order to manage perceived inequalities and prejudices team leaders and members need to:

- ***Be aware of the status quo within the organisation and know their team.***
 - ***Role model behaviour that sends a clear message that the organisational status quo will not operate within the team and everyone will be fully involved.***
 - ***Demonstrate that differences will be valued.***
 - ***Tackle prejudices openly with appropriate exercises and best practices.***
-

Managing the Process and Interaction in International Teams

Having looked at three important sources of inequality in international teams, the last part of this chapter shares what the video research highlighted about managing the process and what the satisfied teams did right.

Creating reasonably balanced participation

As mentioned in Chapter Two, many authors regard 'equal participation' as an essential ingredient of effective international teamwork. However, the message should now be clear that it is not so much the *amount* that each person participates as when they are able to participate and how their contributions are received. What the research and our experience suggest is that there is a range of useful 'equality' in the amount of contributions. If the individual contributions are very unequal, unless the cultural norms of the situation say that that is okay or expected, then team members tend to be dissatisfied. On the other hand, unless the team is very small, completely equal participation will probably have been achieved by some very mechanical rules being applied to the interaction. This will also frustrate many people. The best range for Western based teams seems to be somewhere in the middle as shown below. If you imagine joining up the stars in the previous Figures, you get a curve. The lines in Figure 3.4 represent the curves of teams with different levels of equal or unequal contribution.

By looking at the amount that each person contributes in a team, you cannot say which person is happy with what they contributed and which person is not. However, counting even for half an hour can be a very powerful feedback tool for some teams.

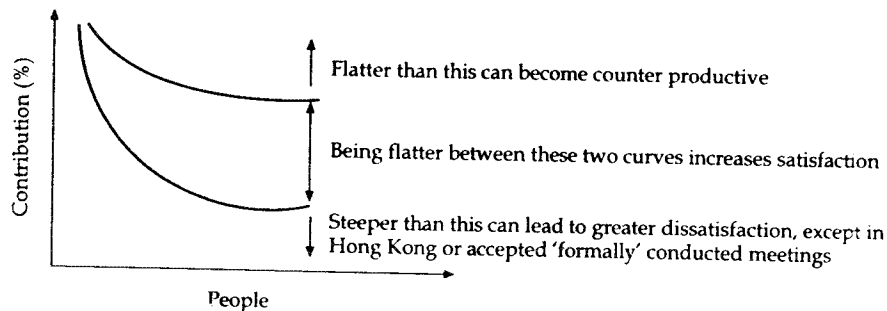


Figure 3.4: Patterns of contribution in international teams

Imagine a group of HR/training employees on a workshop on facilitating international teams. They have seen the evidence that high levels of interruption can exclude second language speakers. A little later they are given a task to solve. Their interaction is counted and the rate of simultaneous talk is over 40 per cent. All sorts of excuses start emerging, but the message goes powerfully home.

In another team, one member was hardly talking at all and nobody seems to notice. The facilitator again just counted for half an hour, using the chart in Appendix 2. The results are quickly put up on a flipchart and the facilitator says 'this is your pattern of interaction over the last half an hour. Just spend a few minutes looking at it and seeing if you are all happy with it, and then left them alone. No judgements were being made that there must be equal participation, but an opportunity to address any major imbalance was created.

Counting is a powerful, simple tool and most teams are able to laugh about the outcomes and discuss them without rancour.

Questioning the interaction when things are not going well

This is not easy, unless the team is prepared to do it. Neither the most satisfied or balanced teams in the video research ever stopped to question their interaction or review how they were working together. Perhaps, being small, they could get away with it. However, for all the other teams in the video research, the post questionnaires showed that there was a significant relationship between a larger number of different nationalities in the team (regardless of the size of the team), and the team not wanting to work together again and lower team spirit. The team members were not enjoying themselves.

In one team, a British member started persistently pointing out that they should find a better way of working together that prevented the 'international' managers dominating the 'locals'. At first the other British members gave him a very hard time with retorts like 'if you do not have any concrete suggestions then stay quiet as at least we are getting on with the task'. The response he got was impatience, if not a loathing for, 'soft' issues. He kept going and slowly the team came around.

If this is a typical reaction, it is easy to see why men and women do want not to intervene, especially if the team has not laid any ground rules about participation at the beginning that can be referred back to. It takes courage to stick your neck out to ensure that the end result is good for all . . . not just for some.

An outstanding question for managers is how much consciously intervening to encourage participation and good interaction makes a difference to the quality of the outcome. Our experience in real organisations, rather than in research labs, would lead us to say it is often dangerous not to do so and intervening effectively can often make a lot of difference. In Wellcome, teams that asked for facilitation from the beginning said that they achieved things in much less time than they had expected and with much less conflict, whereas those that initially declined often came crying for help when they ran into trouble.

Structuring the interaction and taking up good ideas

Structuring the task well in terms of using and appreciating innovative ideas seem to be two key factors that affect overall satisfaction in teams working on creative and evaluative tasks.

Two 'identical teams' were created for a senior training programme on strategic planning in a South East Asian Bank. One (Bank 1) was quite satisfied, the other (Bank 2) was not. Both teams were facilitated throughout the four days of working together and received various inputs on project planning, creative thinking and process review. Each team was given a region of the world in which to develop a strategy for the Bank. The different amount of knowledge and different degrees of presence of the Bank in the two regions, the Middle East and Latin America, did not make much difference as the teams went off to look for information on the countries in each region and then returned to make individual presentations. The crisis in each team came at the midpoint after two days, when they had to decide how to use and structure the information they had gathered into a well-argued strategy.

With the walls of their small room covered in flipcharts and information, Bank 1 started a heated argument that began to get rough. One Hong Kong Chinese man suggested that they go down the squash courts and shout out ideas for different possible strategies. They came back with eight possible strategies which they laid out and systematically began to argue them through, using the information and experience that they had gathered in the team. Doing something active changed the whole dynamic in the team and created a much higher energy level. The Hong Kong Chinese team members who had previously been quite quiet, were spontaneously getting up and writing ideas on the walls. The whole team energy was lifted onto a different plane and the excitement at doing something good began to build. In review, although the same Hong Kong man kept complaining that the rate of interruption and speaking was too fast for him, he was praised again and again by the team for his creative lateral ideas.

Bank 2 had no predominant subgroup. They were all very fluent in English and early on felt that they really liked each other referring to themselves as 'the friendly team'. Their enthusiasm quickly translated into all talking at once. Sometimes three or four people were talking at the same time. It did not take them long to realise that they were not listening to each other or getting on very fast. The problem was how to control their enthusiasm without losing it. They appointed a Sri Lankan to be the team leader in order to manage the interaction. He tried to enforce the rule that people spoke one at a time and put their hands up before speaking. He also took his appointment as giving him the right to put his ideas before everyone else. The energy in the team began to drain away. When it came to having to decide how to build a strategy, the energy was gone and they spent two hours going around in circles. Quite personal arguments started breaking out and they sat wondering what had gone wrong. Slowly they pulled themselves out of it but never fully recovered the initial enthusiasm.

One difference between the two teams was that, at the crucial half time stage, Bank 1 managed to contain and channel their heated differences creatively, whereas Bank 2 lost it. It may have partly been due to lack of good information on Latin America but also because they never established a communication pattern that enabled them to exhibit high friendly energy, but which was also structured enough to accomplish their task.

One person in Bank 1 was constantly challenging the team on their process and the way that the 'Anglo international' staff members were dominating the 'regional' staff. As a result, the two most 'regional' staff members were asked to make the final presentation to four board members. The most dominant British 'international' manager, who seemed to feel that his global troubleshooting reputation was on the line, was constantly being asked to back off and slow

down. At one point a very reserved regional Hong Kong Chinese manager physically put his arm across in front of the international manager to stop him talking. Despite having to manage these strong characters, satisfaction and success came from being able to acknowledge and act upon bright ideas and structuring the interaction so that the team can channel a heated argument into a constructive outcome.

When things go right

What did the most satisfied and balanced teams do? Much went right because they were small, and because second language speakers set the pace. However, they did do some key things:

- They introduced themselves and early on asked who had the most experience on the task. In one of the most dysfunctional teams, members were still asking each other their names after four hours of teamwork.
- They created a slow steady pace of English and unconsciously paused very slightly after every third sentence to take a brief look around that everyone was following. It did not disrupt the flow and gave just enough time for someone to come in if they had a problem or needed clarification.
- When they asked for ideas they made sure everyone had said what they wanted to. One British dominated group squashed a Pakistani's suggestion that they go around one by one and get ideas and suggested people shout out. The Pakistani and Brazilian remained silent.
- When they spilt into subgroups, they consciously spread the skills so that people could learn from each other. In one team it was clear that second language speakers spoke more in the whole team after contributing in subgroups. In two of the least effective teams, the subgroups were decided by the self-appointed team leaders to ensure that they and their colleagues were covering the most important parts of the task, leaving some people hanging.

Light-hearted incidents

Thankfully there are those small incidents that bring a smile to an observer's face. An American lady had been appointed the leader of an otherwise all male team. She had been sick for two meetings and came back in the last meeting as they were wrapping up. Flipcharts covered with writing adorned the walls. She asked if someone could quickly read her through what they had done. A British man started and stopped occasionally to check that she understood what he meant. 'Oh yes' she commented, 'I understand your verbiage'. At this point the four British men all burst out laughing, none of them noticing the bewildered face of the American woman and then the British man continued. Later again one of the British men joked about their verbiage, again all the Brits laughed

and the American woman looked puzzled. Verbiage in UK English means something akin to 'verbal diarrhoea' but presumably simply means 'words' in US English, without the derogatory overtone.

Such events, if they were recognised, can bring the humour back into cross-cultural incidents in international teams. When a team can readily joke about their similarities and differences and *everyone* finds it funny, then the team has matured.

The following chapter outlines what teams and team leaders can do to overcome the difficulties and to sculpt their interaction to fit the tasks over four main phases of their teamwork. It is quite detailed and in-depth. Even so, our impression from our work and research is that even doing a little, such as outlined above, can make a difference to how well team members work together. That said, most of the teams described in this last chapter did not have their company's future profitability riding on their backs. If your team does, like the Glaxo-Wellcome medical development teams, then being very proactive in managing the interaction within the team is highly recommended.

Summary of Key Learning Points

- ***Patterns of inclusion and exclusion, the creation of 'them' and 'us' groups and dysfunctional communication patterns are the same as in any team, but often more pronounced.***
- ***Three types of inequality, structural, linguistic and perceived inequality based on preconceptions and stereotypes can create dysfunctional behaviour and need to be actively managed.***
- ***Leaders need to make sure that an impersonal atmosphere is broken down initially by good introductions.***
- ***The speed and pattern of speech should give second language speakers and others who prefer not to start talking when someone else is already talking, time to think and speak.***
- ***Leaders need to watch what people say so that stereotypical comments and behaviours that exclude any one individual are diffused and changed.***
- ***Brainstorming or collecting ideas and prioritising them needs to be done in a systematic way that consciously asks for everyone's ideas. 'Shouting out' means some people may not participate.***
- ***Leaders need to manage the response to alienation should it happen.***
- ***Everyone needs to be comfortable with the decision making process or alternatives need to be found.***