Culturally Diverse Teams that Work

Kenji Klein, University of California, Irvine

Globalization of the economy combined with increasing reliance on teams in the workplace has led to a dramatic increase in the number and prevalence of culturally diverse work teams in companies across the globe. Such teams can boost performance as firms benefit from the multiple perspectives inherent in such diversity, but that potential comes with some risk.

Research on the performance of culturally diverse teams is divided on whether such diversity is helpful or harmful for teams. Diverse teams often suffer because individuals struggle to understand, trust, or relate to people with different backgrounds or perspectives. This distrust or lack of understanding can lead to tension, hostility, lack of cooperation and poor communication that undermine team performance. Yet, diverse teams can also be a great benefit because team members possess different perspectives and a wider variety of information. The process of reconciling these differences leads to deeper consideration of issues, more sophisticated understanding, and broader exploration of ideas, all of which boost performance.

The important question for managers is how to make use of culturally diverse teams in a way that avoids the problems associated with diversity while gaining the benefits. The research on diversity in teams has explored this problem in depth, and below I will discuss the solutions available to managers based on the research on diversity in teams.

First, when assembling a team, it is important to use diverse teams for the tasks to which they are best suited. A critical weakness of homogenous teams is their tendency to converge on solutions prematurely and to come to agreements without considering the many factors that bear upon an issue. This is because homogenous team members often share assumptions that can be incorrect, have a narrower pool of knowledge or experience than diverse teams, or are willing to ignore discrepant information in order to preserve the cohesiveness of the team. This makes them a poor choice for certain types of tasks including those that require considering an issue from many angles or that depend upon out-of-the-box thinking. They are also poorly suited to dealing with issues that have non-obvious dependencies and where missing these dependencies can cause dramatic problems. In such cases, deploying a diverse team is often better because doing so can help ensure consideration of a wide variety of non-obvious issues in enough detail to produce innovative answers or to avoid missing critical problems. Where such factors are not important, however, it may be better to use a more homogenous team because such teams benefit from higher cohesion, more rapid communication, and quicker, less problematic implementation.

Where the task that must be accomplished makes a diverse team desirable, it is important that diverse teams be given time to adjust and to work out the inevitable kinks that come from working together in the face of major differences among team members. Homogenous teams are often quick to establish effective operating procedures. Research demonstrates that in the early stages of a team’s life, diverse teams perform poorly relative to homogenous teams, which are usually quicker to establish effective operating procedures. However, the performance of diverse teams improves over time as team members learn to cope with their differences, understand them, and figure out how to benefit from them. Indeed, with time, diverse teams tend to outperform
homogenous teams, establishing more effective work processes and producing better outcomes. Therefore, projects with short deadlines may be poorly suited to newly-formed diverse teams. However, for projects with a longer time horizon, diverse teams may be quite appropriate and provide better performance than homogenous teams.

Finally, the research on diverse teams points to the importance of bringing difference to the surface and integrating it rather than suppressing or ignoring it. Analysis comparing successful diverse teams to poorly performing diverse teams has shown that successful diverse teams were better at integrating their diverse knowledge, perspectives, and beliefs. This required first identifying and communicating differences, then finding ways to resolve the different perspectives without simply papering over them or favoring one point of view over the others. In poorly performing teams, this does not occur. Differences are either suppressed in order to maintain surface agreement or become the source of personal conflict that undermine cooperation or cohesion within the team.

A key element in managing this integration and avoiding personal conflict based on differences is the quality of communication within the team. Where team members are able to communicate across the boundaries that divide them, personal conflicts can be avoided, team members come to know and understand the different perspectives within the team, and teams can integrate these diverse perspectives into their tasks and solutions. There are a number of actions managers can take to ensure communication quality within diverse teams. The first is to create a psychologically safe communication climate within the organization and the team. This is an environment characterized by open and supportive communication, where team members are able to say what they think, where vocal individuals do not dominate, and where members use language that is considerate of others’ feelings. Such an environment allows differences of perspective and opinion to become known and fosters creative problem solving as group members work collectively to resolve the differences among them that surface.

Critical to creating such an environment is choosing team members who are sensitive to difference and who are good at communicating (both understanding and conveying ideas and information) across cultural boundaries. When such team members lack such skills, it is worth investing in training them in cross cultural communication. Team members need not be cross cultural communication stars, but they should have a minimum level of competence. In many areas of human psychology negative influences outweigh positive influences, and research shows that this is usually the case with teams. Therefore, it is particularly important to avoid placing individuals who are especially bad at cross cultural communication in culturally diverse teams. By following these practices, firms can reap the benefits of diverse teams while minimizing the challenges they can pose.
REFERENCES


