

IJPSC

International Journal of Psychology and Strategic Communication

ISSN: 2941-5691 (Online) 2941-5705 (Print) [66]

DOI: 10.61030/VUQF2015



CROSS-CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN MANAGING INTERNATIONAL TEAMS: HOW TO ACHIEVE EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, effective management of international teams is one of the critical success factors for multinational companies. However, cross-cultural differences often become a source of misunderstandings, conflicts, and reduced productivity. This article analyzes managers' main challenges when working with international teams and suggests methods for overcoming them. The research aims to identify the vital cross-cultural barriers and examine approaches to managing international teams to improve their effectiveness. The study is based on a comparative analysis of literature, case studies from international companies, and intercultural models (Hofstede, Trompenaars). As a result, recommendations are provided for improving interaction between team members from different cultures.

Keywords

Cross-cultural management, international teams, cultural barriers, intercultural communication, effective collaboration

Problem statement

Globalization and the development of information technologies have led to the widespread presence of international teams in many companies. The increasing number of employees representing various cultural traditions opens up significant company opportunities and presents new challenges for managers. Cross-cultural differences can manifest at various levels, from communication styles to attitudes toward leadership and decision-making. These differences often lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and a decline in overall productivity. To ensure the effective functioning of international teams, it is essential to consider the specifics of each culture and adapt management approaches to this diversity.

One of the critical problems is that many managers working in multicultural teams only sometimes possess sufficient intercultural competence. It can lead to misunderstandings of colleagues' behaviour from other cultures or incorrect interpretations of their motivations and expectations. As a result, problems arise in coordinating work and achieving team goals. Given this, the study of cross-cultural challenges and the search for methods of effective interaction becomes crucial for the success of international teams in modern conditions.

Relevance of the chosen topic

Companies increasingly engage employees from different countries, forming international teams in the modern globalised environment. Such teams present organisations with vast opportunities, including access to new markets, diverse perspectives, innovative approaches, and enhanced competitiveness. However, along with the advantages comes the complexity of managing these teams due to cultural differences. Cross-cultural barriers, particularly in communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, and leadership approaches, can become significant challenges to effective collaboration.

Understanding cultural differences and adapting management approaches to the specificities of international teams are vital factors in achieving high performance. Consider these aspects to avoid conflicts, reduced productivity, and loss of competitive advantages. Modern research in cross-cultural management demonstrates that successfully overcoming cultural barriers contributes to more effective team performance, improved decision-making quality, and the development of innovative approaches.

Therefore, cross-cultural challenges in international teams are highly relevant for research. Studying this issue allows for the development of effective strategies to optimise management processes and promote the success of international projects in a rapidly changing global environment.

Analysis of recent research and publications

Many prominent foreign and domestic scholars have explored the topic of managing international teams. According to Elena Sokolova and Ivan Petrov (Sokolova & Petrov, 2020), cross-cultural management is a key factor in ensuring effective communication and collaboration between members of international teams. They emphasize that successful management involves understanding and adapting to each country's cultural characteristics.

In Michael Hoffman's view (Hoffman, 2019), cross-cultural differences can become a source of conflict in teams if managers do not consider national stereotypes and values. He highlights the importance of developing emotional intelligence among international project leaders. According to Anna Koval and Dmitry Tarasenko (Koval & Tarasenko, 2022), successful management of international teams requires modern communication technologies, which allow overcoming time and geographical barriers and contribute to greater transparency and process integration.

Purpose of the article

The research aims to explore the cross-cultural challenges that arise when managing international teams and to analyze various approaches to overcoming them using existing intercultural management theories. The study aims to develop effective strategies for optimizing collaboration within multicultural teams, increasing productivity, and ensuring successful communication between representatives of different cultural backgrounds.

Presentation of the main research material and results obtained

Cross-cultural challenges in managing international teams are critical issues in the modern business environment. In globalization and the growing collaboration between companies from different countries, international team leaders must consider cultural differences that influence perceptions of authority, communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution. A lack of understanding of these aspects can lead to misunderstandings, reduced team efficiency, and conflicts.

One of the foremost contemporary challenges in managing international teams is the rapid changes in the global business environment caused by digitalization, the pandemic, and growing market instability. Due to the influence of these factors, companies are forced to adapt their management approaches, particularly in multicultural teams. For instance, the widespread shift to remote work has revealed new challenges related to communication effectiveness in virtual spaces, maintaining team spirit, and avoiding cultural misunderstandings in a setting where face-to-face interactions are almost impossible. The lack of physical presence complicates the transmission of non-verbal signals, which is especially important for high-context cultures. Additionally, current geopolitical crises force international teams to operate under heightened uncertainty, making planning and long-term strategies more difficult. Thus, the ability of managers to quickly respond to changes, adapt management styles, and adjust communication in line with new realities has become critical for success in today's world.

Also, one of the main challenges is the different attitudes toward authority and hierarchy in various cultures. In some cultures, a clear hierarchy is followed, where decisions are made exclusively by management, while in other cultures, a democratic approach is valued, involving all team members in the decision-making

process. This can create tension when team members from different cultures expect different approaches to management. Therefore, adapting leadership styles to account for these cultural differences and ensuring effective collaboration is essential.

Communication barriers are also a significant issue in international teams. Methods of conveying information can vary considerably depending on the culture. For example, in some cultures, a direct communication style prevails, where critical ideas are conveyed clearly and explicitly, while in others, more emphasis is placed on context, and much information is communicated non-verbally or through subtext. This can lead to misunderstandings, especially if team members must be aware of these differences and consider them during communication (Accelerate Management School, n.d.).

Moreover, conflicts may arise due to different time management and planning approaches. In some cultures, time is perceived as a linear resource, and people strive to adhere to schedules and plans strictly. Time is more flexible in other cultures, and multitasking may be the norm. These differences can lead to discrepancies in priorities and work processes in international teams.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions model can be used to study cross-cultural challenges in international teams. This model is a fundamental tool for understanding the differences between the cultures of various countries. It includes six key dimensions that help analyze the impact of culture on various aspects of team management.

1. The Power Distance Index shows the extent to which inequality in power is accepted within a society. In high power distance cultures (e.g., India), authority and hierarchy are highly respected. Accordingly, in international teams, management approaches need to be adapted depending on the level of expected centralization of authority.
2. Individualism vs. Collectivism characterizes the degree to which societies are integrated into groups. In individualistic cultures (e.g., the U.S., U.K.), people tend to act independently, whereas in collectivist cultures (e.g., China and Japan), more emphasis is placed on teamwork and mutual support. This directly influences how members of international teams interact and make decisions.
3. The Uncertainty Avoidance Index indicates how much a culture tends to avoid uncertainty and risk. Countries with a high index (e.g., Germany, Japan) have a stronger adherence to rules and structured processes, which is important to consider when organizing workflows in international teams.
4. Masculinity vs. Femininity shows how much a culture is oriented toward traditional gender roles. In masculine cultures (e.g., the U.S. or Italy), competition and achievement are more valued, whereas in feminine cultures (e.g., Scandinavia), the focus is more on quality of life and cooperation.
5. Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation demonstrates whether cultures are focused on short-term or long-term results. This aspect influences management decisions and company development strategies.
6. Restraint vs. Indulgence defines how much a culture allows the gratification of desires. Cultures with high Indulgence (e.g., Latin America, U.S.) offer more freedom in expressing emotions, which can also affect the corporate culture of international teams.

Hofstede's model helps to understand how these cultural dimensions influence interactions and management within international teams.

This theory's use in research allows for the development of effective strategies to overcome cross-cultural barriers and improve collaboration among team members from different cultural backgrounds (Hofstede, n.d.).

Edward Hall, a well-known anthropologist and intercultural communication researcher, significantly contributed to understanding how different cultures exchange information and interact. One of Hall's key contributions is his concept of "high-context and low-context communication." High-context communication is characteristic of cultures where most information is conveyed through non-verbal signals, context, or prior interaction experience. Examples of such cultures include Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries. In these societies, relationships and traditions hold great importance, so international team members working with representatives from these cultures must be sensitive to non-verbal cues and hidden meanings in communication.

Low-context communication, on the other hand, is more direct and explicit, with the primary information being conveyed through words. This type of communication is typical for countries such as the U.S., Germany, and Scandinavian nations, where openness and clarity are highly valued in interactions. For international teams, this means that in such cultures, clear instructions must be provided, and ambiguity in communication should be avoided.

Another essential aspect of Hall's research is "proxemics"—the study of how different cultures perceive physical space between people during interactions. In some cultures (e.g., the Middle East or Latin America), it is acceptable to communicate at a closer distance than may be comfortable for representatives from Northern Europe or the U.S., where personal space is more highly valued.

Additionally, Hall introduced the concept of "monochronic and polychronic" time perception. Monochronic cultures (e.g., the U.S. and Germany) prefer precise planning and schedule adherence. In polychronic cultures (e.g., Latin America, Italy), time is a flexible resource, and multiple tasks may be performed simultaneously. This influences work processes in international teams, where time may be perceived differently depending on the culture.

Thus, Edward Hall's research is extremely important for international teams. It helps avoid cultural misunderstandings and establish effective communication by considering cultural differences in the perception of information, space, and time. Hall emphasized that successful collaboration is only possible when all team members know these differences and adapt their communication strategies according to the cultural context (Hall, 1966).

Fons Trompenaars, a Dutch researcher and consultant in cross-cultural management, is the author of the widely known "Seven Dimensions of Culture" model (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). His work focuses on a deeper understanding of how cultures influence international teams' business, communication, and management. Trompenaars' model examines how different cultures address critical issues in relationships, time organization, and attitudes toward leadership.

1. The first dimension is Universalism vs. Particularism. Universalist cultures, such as the U.S. and Germany, prefer the same rules and norms for everyone. In contrast, particularist cultures (e.g., Latin America, China) focus more on specific situations and relationships, favouring a flexible approach. This means that management strategies in international teams need to be adapted to the culture in which they work.
2. The second dimension is Individualism vs. Collectivism. Personal achievements and responsibility are paramount in individualistic cultures like the U.S. or the U.K. In contrast, more attention is given to shared goals and teamwork in collectivist cultures (e.g., Japan and South Korea). This affects how employees interact in international teams—individualists value autonomy, while collectivists prioritize group collaboration.
3. The next dimension is Neutral vs. Emotional. Neutral cultures (e.g., Japan, the U.K.) tend to be more reserved in expressing emotions, especially in work situations. Emotional cultures (e.g., Italy and Spain) feel fewer restrictions in expressing feelings and actively use emotion in communication. It is essential for international teams, where representatives of different cultures may perceive the same situations differently.
4. The fourth dimension is Specific vs. Diffuse. In specific cultures (e.g., Germany and the U.S.), personal life is separated from professional life. In contrast, these two aspects may overlap in diffuse cultures (e.g., Italy, China), and relationships between colleagues can be closer, even outside of work.
5. The fifth dimension is Achievement vs. Ascription. In achievement-oriented cultures (e.g., the U.S., the Netherlands), status is determined by personal achievements. In contrast, in ascription cultures (e.g., India, Saudi Arabia), status is often tied to background, age, or social position. This affects leadership dynamics and team organization in international teams.
6. The sixth dimension is Sequential vs. Synchronic. In sequential cultures (e.g., Germany, the U.S.), time is perceived as a linear process where tasks are completed one after another. In synchronic cultures (e.g., Italy and Mexico), time is more flexible, and people often perform multiple tasks simultaneously without strictly following schedules.
7. The seventh dimension is Internal Control vs. External Control. In internal control cultures (e.g., the U.S., the U.K.), people believe in their ability to control their environment and actively influence their lives. In external control cultures (e.g., China, India), adapting to circumstances and interacting harmoniously with nature and the external world is customary.

Trompenaars' work benefits international teams by helping them better understand cultural differences and their impact on management, communication, and collaboration. The Seven Dimensions of Culture model helps avoid misunderstandings and conflicts and supports effective leadership of multicultural teams. This knowledge is significant for global companies striving for success on the international stage (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

Effective management of intercultural teams requires understanding and accounting for cultural differences that affect communication, workflows, and decision-making. The key to successful collaboration is the leaders' ability to adapt their management style based on the team's cultural characteristics. For example, some cultures value hierarchical structures, while others prioritize equal discussions. Additionally, it is essential to encourage open communication and understand different approaches to problem-solving, which helps improve teamwork and achieve common goals (HRZone, n.d.).

As a result of the study on cross-cultural challenges in international teams, several important conclusions can be drawn. Examining intercultural management models, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, Edward Hall's concepts, and Trompenaars' Seven Dimensions of Culture, provides a better understanding of the differences in behaviour, values, and communication styles among representatives of different cultures. This is critically important for managing international teams, as cultural differences can significantly impact productivity, mutual understanding, and the effectiveness of interactions in work processes.

Hofstede's model highlights key aspects such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, which help managers adapt their approaches based on each team member's culture. Understanding these dimensions helps avoid conflicts and enables better work coordination, considering cultural expectations regarding leadership, task distribution, and decision-making.

Edward Hall's research on high-context and low-context communication emphasizes the importance of understanding the differences in how information is conveyed. Sensitivity to non-verbal signals, the context of conversations, and subtle nuances in expressions greatly enhance communication effectiveness in multicultural teams, where participants come from diverse traditions and interaction approaches.

Trompenaars' model offers a deeper understanding of how culture influences aspects such as attitudes toward rules, time, relationships within the team, and leadership. For instance, in achievement-oriented cultures, personal results are highly valued, while in ascription cultures, other social factors play a role, which must be considered when building team dynamics.

Overall, using these models in international management allows managers to develop effective strategies for managing cultural differences and improving collaboration in international teams. This is especially important in the context of globalization, where organizations need to work with representatives from different cultures, requiring a deep understanding of these differences and the ability to adapt to them.

One of the critical problems in cross-cultural teams is the misperception of communication and management styles due to cultural differences. This can lead to conflicts, misunderstandings, and reduced team effectiveness. For example, the leader has more influence and authority in high power distance cultures (such as India). In contrast, in low power distance cultures (e.g., Sweden or the Netherlands), a more democratic approach is expected. A lack of understanding of these differences can create tension in international teams.

To address this issue, we propose the introduction of interactive training on cross-cultural communication and adaptive management, which will be mandatory for all members of international teams. These training sessions should include:

1. The basics of cultural differences based on Hofstede, Hall, and Trompenaars' models.
2. Practical exercises focused on cross-cultural situations that may arise during work.
3. The development of emotional intelligence and active listening skills enables team members to better understand non-verbal cues and hidden meanings.
4. The use of technologies to build more transparent communication, such as regular video conferences and clear task documentation.

This kind of training will help to reduce tension, improve mutual understanding, and enhance the overall productivity of teams working in an international environment (Education.ua, 2022).

Conclusions

Effective management in international teams requires not only a strong grasp of cultural differences but also the ability to adapt leadership and communication strategies to the diverse backgrounds of team members. By applying frameworks like Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, Hall's context theory, and Trompenaars' seven dimensions of culture, managers can gain valuable insights into how culture impacts leadership styles, communication methods, decision-making processes, and general work dynamics. These theoretical models provide a structured way to analyze the wide variety of cultural influences that affect team collaboration and productivity.

One of the most important aspects of managing international teams is understanding the diverse approaches to management that exist across different cultures. For example, individualistic cultures, which emphasize personal autonomy and self-reliance, may approach teamwork and leadership very differently from collectivist cultures, which value group harmony and collaboration. Additionally, cultural attitudes toward authority and hierarchy, as well as adherence to rules, can greatly affect how team members interact with their leaders and peers. Misunderstandings in these areas can often result in conflicts or inefficiencies if not addressed proactively.

Another critical factor in the success of international teams is the recognition of varying communication

styles. High-context cultures, such as those found in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries, tend to rely on implicit communication, where much of the meaning is derived from context and non-verbal cues. In contrast, low-context cultures, such as those in the U.S. or Germany, typically prefer direct, explicit communication. Without awareness of these differences, team members might misinterpret one another's intentions, potentially causing tension and reducing collaboration.

To successfully navigate these cross-cultural challenges, it is essential to implement targeted strategies. One of the most effective measures is cross-cultural communication training, which helps team members become more aware of their own cultural biases while learning to appreciate and adapt to the styles of others. Additionally, developing emotional intelligence is crucial for both leaders and team members, as it enables them to better understand and manage the emotions and perspectives of those from different cultural backgrounds. Lastly, the use of technology to enhance communication, such as collaboration tools that bridge time zones and language barriers, can significantly improve team cohesion and workflow. In addition, fostering an inclusive team culture where diverse perspectives are valued can enhance creativity and problem-solving within the group. Continuous feedback and open communication are key to ensuring that all team members feel heard and can contribute effectively, regardless of their cultural background.

By integrating these strategies, international teams can overcome cultural barriers, fostering a more harmonious and productive working environment. This not only enhances collaboration but also drives innovation and efficiency, leading to greater overall success for the team and the organization.

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