

CHALLENGES PERTAINING TO CROSS CULTURAL ISSUES

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INDIA AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

India is 7th largest land mass in the world, the land that houses 1.2 billion people in the world, land of 22 official languages, 3000 dialects, over 12 religions and multiple tribal faiths. Diversity in India is not just accidental variety but is an inseparable intrinsic characteristic and constituent of our nation. As frequently mentioned by Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru, India's mantra is "Unity in Diversity", which was first used as a phrase in 1902 by Rabindra Nath Tagore in a Bengali essay, "Bharatbarsher Itihas".

When one thinks of diversity, the ideas that are generated are in the realms of region, ethnicity, gender, language, culture and other such factors. Objective of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it does theoretical analysis of elements of diversity, its reasons, benefits and methods to manage while second is my personal experience on managing cross cultural teams.

CASE OF MY EMPLOYER – ENGINEERS INDIA LIMITED

EIL or Engineers India Limited is a construction design and engineering consultancy, specializing in Oil and Gas Production and Processing, LNG Terminals, Petrochemicals, Ports and Infrastructure Projects. Company desires to grow in these core business areas remain a high profit business. EIL's current portfolio includes:

- (1) Refinery up gradation and expansion projects
- (2) Pipelines, Terminals and Storages
- (3) Infrastructure Sector Projects.

EIL is working on Government Projects on National Highways, Air Ports, Special Economic Zones, Bharat Nirman Yojna, Metro Rail, etc. EIL enjoys branding as company of national significance with high credibility/ comfort particularly with other PSU clients.

The challenges that EIL faces are in terms of problems at work place generated by cross cultural issues and diversity, are of varied levels of complexity. Cultural issues are different and are independent of level of education.

Diversity for Engineers India Limited or any company is existence of many unique individuals in the (1) Work Place, (2) Market Place and (3) Community.

This includes employees, customers, suppliers, from different nations, cultures, ethnic groups, generations, gender, backgrounds, skills, abilities and all other unique differences that make each of us who we are.

Cultural differences arise because of the typical attitudes and societal mindset in which people grew up. Further now that EIL is trying to play on larger international scale, more factors have been added to already multiple aspects of multiculturalism and marketplace diversity.

CROSS CULTURE CHALLENGES

1. Language – People speaking different languages find it difficult to communicate effectively when working in groups.
2. Religion – Animosity or ill feeling could stem from religious differences.
3. Caste – Caste divide could make its presence felt even in the most open and varied cultures of workplaces of modern India.
4. Ethnicity – Misunderstandings can arise because of perceived ethnic stereotypes.
5. Cultural Barriers and Ineffective communication that leads to confusion, lack of team work and morale.

6. High attrition due to lack to adjustments in a Public Sector Company environments.
7. Negative attitudes towards non homogenous work force and behaviour can be barriers to organizational growth and work productivity.
8. Lack of cross cultural/gender/generation team building exercises.
9. Overcoming discrimination and promoting inclusiveness it the biggest challenge

EIL'S STRATEGY TO MANAGE CROSS CULTURAL CHALLENGES

To manage some of these cross cultural and diversity issues, EIL organizes community interaction through different sports and cultural activities, such as Annual Day, Sports Day and Women's day celebrations, in which not just employee but also their families can participate.

EIL also has a separate Raj Bhasha Vibhag (Hindi Division) to encourage use of national language as a common language at work place. Spandan is another get together of the newly inducted employees.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS TO EIL

1. Encourage the use of a common language at work place
2. Cross ethnological teams should be formed whenever possible
3. Team building exercise should be integral part of any team or project
4. Cross ethnic mentoring scheme whereby a mentor from different ethnic group is assigned to new recruits
5. Diversity appreciation events like cultural programs for employees

BENEFITS OF CROSS CULTURAL TEAMS

Cross cultural teams offer potential to design products and policies with higher applicability to India and global economy although diversity is also a recipe for friction.

Cross cultural teams help improve problem solving, Increase creativity and innovation, Increase organizational understanding and flexibility, Improve the quality of personnel through better recruitment and Retention and also Improve marketing strategies, especially for organization that sell products and services to end users.

PRICE OF POORLY MANAGED CROSS CULTURAL TEAMS

One of the critical challenges of cross cultural teams in building and (1) Maintaining Trust and (2) Sustaining Motivation of each person involved. Ignoring cross culture issues can cost company – time, money and efficiency. Additionally consequences can include detrimental tension between people of differing in culture, loss of productivity, because of increased conflict, inability to attract and retain talented, complaints and legal actions resulting in lost investment in recruitment and training.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF MULTICULTURALISM

I have had an opportunity to work in Canada for over a year in a multicultural team of Canadian, South Korean, Thai, Ecuadorian, Canadian, German, Philippines, Argentina, Spanish, Pakistani and Indian staff.

Let us review importance of time - How you treat time, particularly meetings and appointment is the most common example to show multi cultural differences.

Perspective of Time

Issue of time can vary across different cultures. North Americans do become very offended when someone is "late" for a meeting. In fact, one of my superiors would

become so irritated if a vendor arrives for a meeting (even if it is 5 minutes late) that he will sometimes refuse to do business with the vendor. However, In India when you invite people for dinner “around 7 pm” nobody is offended if by 8pm only one or two guests had arrived.

In Germany, trains are scheduled for 12:03, and 12:07; rarely for 12:15 or 12:30. And they arrive precisely on time. Probably because Germany is also center for manufacturing of watches. I am told that it is same in Switzerland. If you are late, it is rarely by two or three minutes. Mechanical failures do happen, in which case the delay is at least ten minutes; but the schedule is changed again to 1:17, not 1:15, etc.

On the other hand, people from India and the Philippines rarely arrive at meetings on time. And if they start ten or fifteen minutes late, I have yet to hear anyone apologize. You ask someone what time to come for dinner. They will say, "Around 7 o'clock". You can be sure nothing will start before 7:45; and no one will be upset!

Other Experience of Multi Cultural Issues

- In some cultures like French, India and Spanish, people always underestimate problem and say “No problem”. Even if it is unwise according to the situation as there will be lots of problems. Americans tend to believe it and which makes our “Chalta hai”, “Ho jayega”, “No Problem” attitude a bad mix. Americans on the contrary, are direct and to the point. Their approach is not beating round the bush but starting the work and think about it some other time. I think that attitude of 'start working now and start worrying later' is stronger in Australian staff.
- Swedish I have heard are appeared to be full of empathy. Everybody loved working with them. Well educated, knowing their languages and endlessly understanding for the world surrounding.
- Generally, we are turned off by "aggressive" women. In my surroundings, when a man meets a woman, it is up to the man to make the first move to shake hands. A woman who extends her hand first, may be seen as being "aggressive".

- On the other hand, due to cultural reasons some people have extreme shyness in speaking up, particularly at the beginning of a conversations, may be seen as a lack of confidence. When a very confident person sees this, they may assume that the other person can be easily manipulated and may themselves become overly "pushy" with their ideas.
- In Canada at a public place, if you take a seat on a couch, the tendency is other person would either sit at either end, or to avoid sitting there at all. However in India, wouldn't shy away from sitting right next to the person. Incase if a woman wants to sit close beside the man as they both move to take a seat on the couch. It can affect the rest of their relationship.
- North Americans do not hesitate to use first name, almost immediately after the introduction. Germans and also in India people are called by their last names.
- Generally in North America, letter and article writing is very much direct, sharp, straight to the point. Often it is just point-wise. Even the News papers or local language is not very crisp and juicy as per the Eastern Standards. One simple observation is that not many adjectives are used. This would be considered kind of rude and non personal in India. Nothing bad or good, just different!

CONCLUSION

Diversity should be celebrated in its true spirit! Being on a multicultural team is wonderful. Many kinds of innovative thoughts and ideas pop up in discussions. We can share various stories that we have never experienced.

For companies, developing a common work culture in which members of various groups can operate harmoniously for the benefit of company and country at large. Further, in today's corporate world, we need leaders who can hold the key to managing diversity, multiculturalisms with sensitivity and pragmatism to harness the bounty that it yields.

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