

Managing Confrontation in Multicultural Teams

Everyone knows that a little confrontation from time to time is constructive, right? And the classic business literature confirms it. Patrick Lencioni’s Five Dysfunctions of a Team, for example, discusses at length how to achieve the right amount of confrontation for ultimate team effectiveness — and concludes that fear of conflict is one of the five major barriers to success. It was a bestseller in the U.S.

But what if you come from a culture where confrontation is downright rude? Or what if you just happen to have people from such cultures on your team? The fact is that all-American teams — or mono-cultural teams of any nationality — are becoming a thing of the past (except in the classic business literature). In [one recent survey \(PDF\)](#) a full 63% of randomly selected respondents at multi-national companies indicated that nearly half of their teams were located outside their home country.

Over the past few weeks I’ve been conducting interviews with executives from various countries about this issue. Here’s what an Indonesian interviewee told me:

In the Indonesian cultural context, confrontation is considered rude, aggressive, and disrespectful. Open disagreement, particularly in a group forum, is strongly avoided. Even asking another’s point of view can feel confrontational in our culture. We had a meeting with a group of French managers from headquarters, where they went around the table asking each of us: “What do you think about this? What do you think about this? What do you think about this?” At first we were just shocked that we would be put on the spot in a meeting with a lot of people. That is just an insult!

And here’s what a French executive said (making the American way described by Lencioni sound really quite moderate):

Confrontation is part of French culture. The French school system teaches us to first build up our thesis (one side of the argument) and then to build up our anti-thesis (the opposite side of the argument) before coming to a synthesis (conclusion). And this is exactly how we intuitively conduct meetings. On French teams conflict and dissonance are seen as revealing hidden contradiction and stimulating new thinking. We make our points passionately. We like to disagree openly. We like to say things that shock.

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And afterwards we feel that was a great meeting and say, “See you next time!” With confrontation you reach excellence, you have more creativity, and you eliminate risk.

Now imagine that you have to lead a team with both French and Indonesian members. How on earth do you cope? And what happens if there are a whole heap of other nationalities thrown into the mix, all with differing cultural attitudes to confrontation? Well, it is possible to manage a global team and to reap the benefits of disagreement. But you have to tread carefully, using tactics like the following and respecting the various cultures on the team.

- 1. Do your preparation.** In many Asian cultures the default purpose of a meeting is to put a formal stamp on a decision that has been made before the meeting in informal pre-meetings. In Japanese this is called *Nemawashi*. The tendency rings true to various degrees in China, Malaysia, Korea, and Thailand. If you lead a team with members from one of these countries, try making one-on-one phone calls before the formal meeting to hear the real deal.
- 2. Depersonalize the confrontation.** Instead of asking people to express their opinions and challenge one another’s ideas in a meeting, ask team members to send all their ideas to a nominated third party before the meeting and have that person create a list of ideas without stating who had the suggestions. This way, participants can confront each idea during the meeting — without confronting the person associated with it.
- 3. Change your language.** You might try following the advice of Sean Gilbride, an American living and managing in Mexico. He says: “I soon learned that if I wanted to encourage team debate it was important to use phrases like ‘I do not quite understand your point’ and ‘please explain more why

you think that', and to refrain from saying 'I disagree with that' which would shut down the conversation completely."

I'd be interested to hear your strategies and opinions — especially from people who disagree with these points. After all, a little confrontation from time to time is constructive, right?

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