
Managing confrontation in multicultural teams



By [Erin Meyer](#)

Conflict and debate are considered essential to better decision making in some cultures, while in others, it's downright rude. How do you bridge the cultural divide?

Everyone knows that a little confrontation from time to time is constructive—classic business literature confirms it. Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, for instance, 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.

But what if you come from a culture where confrontation is downright rude? Or what if you happen to have people from such cultures on your team? The fact is that all-American teams — or mono-cultural teams of one nationality — are becoming a thing of the past (except in classic business literature). In a recent [survey](#) by CultureWizard, an intercultural training consultancy, a full 63 percent of randomly selected respondents at multinational 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. According to one Indonesian executive, confrontation is considered rude, aggressive, and disrespectful in the Indonesian cultural context. Open disagreement, particularly in a group forum, is strongly avoided. "Even asking another's point of view can feel confrontational in our culture," he said. "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!"

Compare that with the French perspective. "Confrontation is part of [our] culture," said one French executive. "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. 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 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 suggested below and respecting the various cultures on the team.

Do your preparation. In many Asian cultures, the default purpose of a meeting is to put a formal stamp on a decision that has already been made in previous informal 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.

Depersonalise 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.

Change your language. You might try following the advice of Sean Gilbride, an American manager based in Mexico. "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', he says, "and to refrain from saying 'I disagree with that' which would shut down the conversation completely."

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