
Multicultural Teamwork: Accommodate Multiple Perspectives



By Erin Meyer , INSEAD Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Do you see the fish or the aquarium? There is a big difference between the thought patterns of specific and holistic thinkers that can undo a multicultural team's effectiveness.

I was teaching a course to a class of Executive MBA students at INSEAD and I had just given them a small-group assignment. One of the groups was made up of two British students, one German, one American and one Chinese. They had twenty minutes to discuss a case study and then to prepare the answers to four very specific questions.

The Chinese student, let's call him Michael Shen, started the discussions. He began by making some very interesting and important comments about the case and the cell phone industry in general, discussing how the sector had developed and impacted the various countries in the case. However, his observations, though fascinating, were not really answers to the first question.

After several moments Michael's colleagues were becoming visibly impatient. Steve, one of the U.K. students interrupted him. "That's really interesting Michael, but we only have fifteen minutes to discuss these four questions. I think the answer to question one is on page three, paragraph four, sentence two, where it says..." He used that sentence to answer the question and then moved onto the next question.

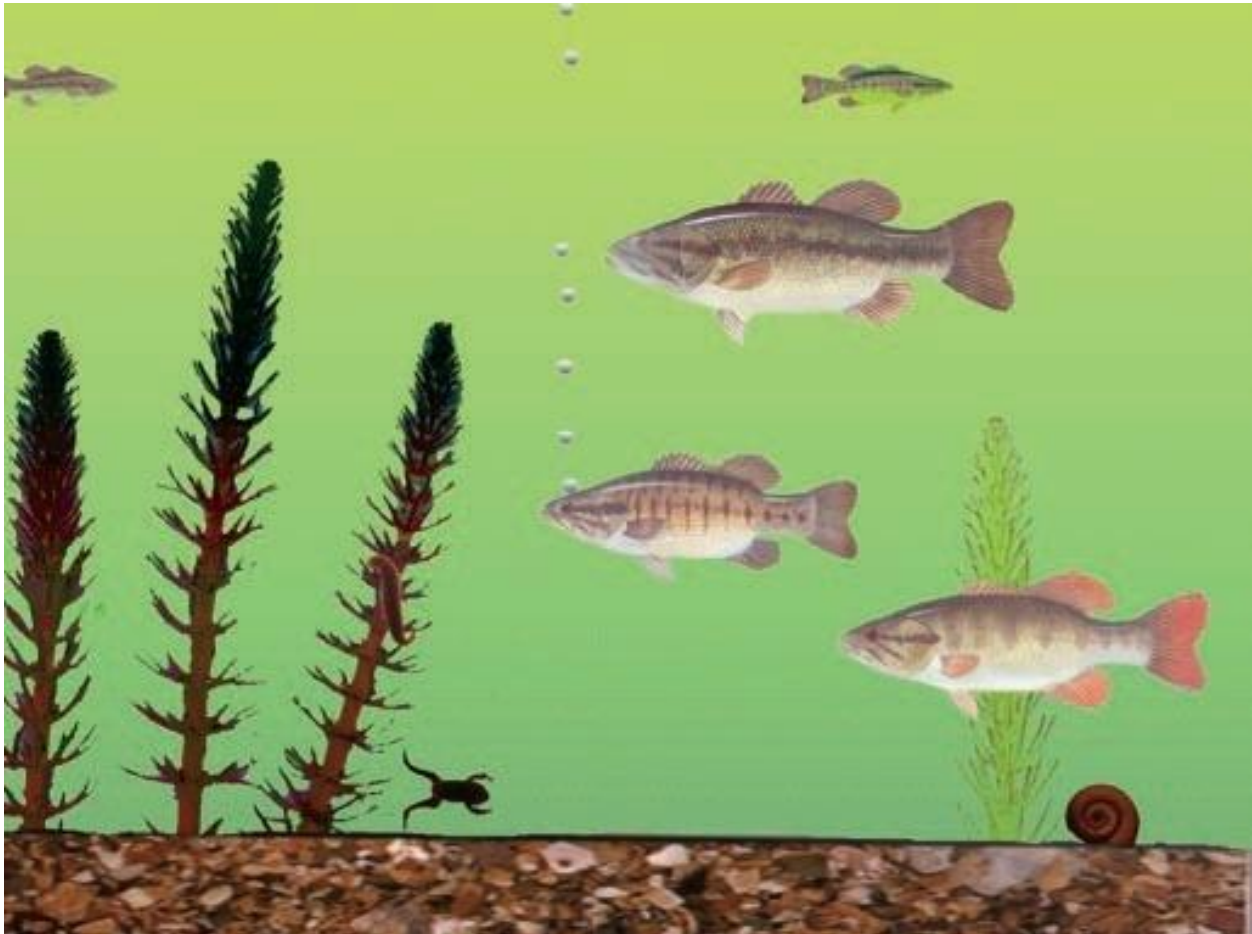
Steve said to me after class, "That's happened to us a few times during this module – that one of our classmates from China begins by taking several minutes to discuss peripheral information, before looping back to the point. I get frustrated. Just answer question one!"

This behaviour reflects the different cultural norms of East Asia and the West. Of course each East Asian and each Western culture is different – often dramatically so. But for this concept we can draw this basic differentiation to understand why Steve and Michael had such different thought patterns.

Multicultural perspectives

In a [study](#) conducted by Professors Richard Nisbett and Takahiko Masuda, twenty-second animated video vignettes of underwater scenes were presented to Japanese and American participants. Afterward, participants were asked what they had seen.

While the Americans mentioned larger, faster-moving, brightly-coloured objects in the foreground (such as the big fish), the Japanese spoke more about what was going on in the background (for example, the small frog bottom left). The Japanese also talked twice as often as the Americans about the interdependencies between the objects up front and the objects in the background.



In a second study, Americans and Japanese were asked to “take a photo of a person”. The Americans most frequently took a close-up, showing all facial features, while the Japanese showed the person in his or her environment

with the human figure quite small.



(Left: American portrait / Right: Japanese portrait)

Notice the common pattern in both studies. The Americans focus on individual items separate from their environment, while the Asians give more attention to backgrounds – and to the links between these backgrounds and the central figures.

The origins of specific and holistic thinking

These tendencies have been borne out in my own interviews with multi-cultural managers. While Northern Europeans and Anglo-Saxons generally follow the American thinking patterns, East Asians respond as the Japanese and Taiwanese did in Nisbett and Masuda's research.

Perhaps it's not surprising. A traditional tenet of Western philosophies and religions is that you can remove an item from its environment and analyse it separately. Cultural theorists call this *specific thinking*.

Chinese religions and philosophies, by contrast, have traditionally emphasised interdependencies and interconnectedness. The Ancient Chinese thought in a *holistic* way, believing that action always occurs in a field of forces. The terms *yin* and *yang* (literally "dark" and "light"), for example, describe how seemingly contrary forces are interdependent.

Here's what one of my Chinese students said after we'd discussed the fish and photo studies:

"Chinese people think from macro to micro, whereas Western people think from micro to macro. For example, when writing an address, the Chinese write in sequence of province, city, district, block, gate number. Westerners do just the opposite. In the same way, Chinese put the surname first, whereas Westerners do it the other way around. And Chinese put the year before month and date."

Management faux pas

This impacts the way business people view each other across the globe. As Bae Pak from the Korean motor company Kia told me, "When we work with Western colleagues, we are often taken aback by their tendency to make

decisions without considering the impact on other business units, clients, and suppliers.”

One Polish manager, Jacek Malecki, provided this example: “When I took my first trip to meet with my Japanese staff I managed the objective-setting process like I always had. I called each person on the team into my office for a meeting, where I outlined his or her individual goals. Although I noticed they asked a lot of peripheral questions during the meetings no one actually explained to me that my approach was not ideal for them, so I went back to Poland with a false sense of comfort.”

Later Malecki saw that the team had spent a lot of time consulting with one another about what each person had been asked to do and how their individual objectives fit together to create a big picture: “The team was now making good progress but not in the way I had segmented the project.”

In a *specific* culture, people usually respond well to receiving very detailed and segmented information about what is expected of each of them. If you need to give instructions to a team member from this kind of culture, focus on what that person needs to accomplish and when. Conversely, if you need to motivate, manage, or persuade someone from a *holistic culture*, spend time explaining the big picture and how all the pieces slot together.

If you are leading a global team, this type of cognitive diversity can cause confusion, inefficiency, and general frustration. But we’ve known for a long time that the more diverse the team, the greater the potential for innovation. If you understand that one person sees a fish and another sees an aquarium, and you think carefully about the benefits of both the specific and holistic approach, you can learn to turn these cultural differences into your team’s greatest assets.

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