Avoiding Culture Clashes When Making Decisions

By Erin Meyer , INSEAD

Should your boss make the decisions for your group? Or should you, as a team member, have a say in them? The answer may depend on the norms of your cultural background. If you have a multicultural team, you can't work effectively until you've addressed these differences in style.

When I first moved to Europe, my new Swedish boss, Per Engman, introduced himself as a typical consensus-building manager. Conscious of my American roots, he explained that this was the best way to ensure that everyone was on board and he hoped that I would be patient with this very Swedish process.

I was initially delighted with the prospect of working with an inclusive boss, who listened carefully to his staff and weighed everyone's views before making a decision. But after my first few weeks, the emails had started mounting up. One morning, this message arrived:

Hey team,

I thought we should meet for an annual face-to-face on December 6th. We could focus the meeting on how to be more client-centric. What do you think?

Per

Our firm was a small consultancy with more work than we could handle and my colleagues, mainly energetic young Swedes, worked long hours to meet targets and keep our clients happy. I didn't feel I had much of an opinion on Per's question, so my automatic response was to hit the delete button and get back to work. But in the hours that followed, my Swedish colleagues began sending their responses, adding suggestions and views on what to focus on. Occasionally Per would inject an email with a few comments. Slowly, they began to reach agreement. I then got an individual email:

Hi Erin,

Haven't heard from you, what do you think?

Per

I really wanted to respond by saying, "I have absolutely no opinion, please make a decision so we can get back to work." But remembering how delighted I felt when Per had told me that he favoured consensual decision-making, I simply replied that I supported whatever the group decided.

As the weeks went on, many other topics got the same treatment and I realised my first impression of this style of working was not at all how I liked to work. I now understood why Per felt he had to explain this consensual approach to me. He later described how it feels to be Swedish working with Americans, who are "too busy to be good team members" and "always trying to impose a decision for decision's sake without soliciting feedback".

Historical roots

As with all cultural characteristics, these differing styles of decision-making have historical roots. American pioneers, many of whom had fled the formal hierarchical structures of their homelands, put emphasis on speed and individualism. The successful pioneers were those who arrived first and worked hard, regarding mistakes as an inevitable side-effect of speed. Americans therefore, naturally developed a dislike for too much discussion, preferring to make decisions quickly.

In a culture like that of the United States, the decision-making responsibility is invested largely in an individual. Decisions tend to be made quickly, early in the process, by one person. But each decision is also flexible—a decision, as I put it, with lowercase *d*. As more discussions occur, new information arises, or differing opinions surface and decisions may be easily revisited or altered. So plans are subject to continual revision—which means that implementation can take quite a long time.

In a consensual culture, it is the decision-making that may take a long time, since everyone is consulted. But once the decision is made, the implementation is rapid, since everyone is on board. And once the decision is made, it is fixed. Once the group makes a choice, the decision is unlikely to change. A decision with a capital *D,* one might say. A good example of this phenomenon is the Japanese ringi decision-making process, a very consensual decision-making protocol.

Jack Sheldon, a British executive who attended a seminar that I ran for Astellas, a Japanese pharmaceutical company, shared stories about his mishaps while trying to work with Tokyo-based managers. Following a problem with a particular product, a decision had to be made regarding whether to discontinue its development. Sheldon was invited to Tokyo to give his view, which was strongly that testing should continue.

> "One of the Japanese managers gave an opening presentation, and during his speech he presented an argument followed by conclusions for why the testing should stop. I sensed that the others were in agreement with his comments. In fact, it seemed that the decision had already been finalised within the group. I presented my slides still feeling that my point of view would win out. But although people were still very polite, it was clear that the Japanese managers were 100 percent aligned against continued testing. I gave all of my arguments and presented all of the facts, but the group wouldn't budge."

What Sheldon hadn't understood was that before Japanese company members sign off on a proposal, consensus building starts with informal, face-to-face discussions. This process of informally making a proposal, getting input, and solidifying support is called *nemawashi.* Literally meaning "root-binding", *nemawashi* is a gardening term that refers to the process of preparing the roots of a plant or tree for transplanting, which protects them from damage. Similarly, *nemawashi* protects a Japanese organisation from

damage caused by disagreement or lack of commitment and follow-through.

At Astellas, the ringi process is even managed by a dedicated software programme.

Avoiding culture clashes

Both consensual and unilateral styles of decision-making can be effective, but members of a global team generally have expectations about decision-making based on their own cultural norms. This can make clashes difficult to understand and manage. If you find yourself working with a team more familiar with consensual decision-making, try applying the following strategies:

- Expect the decision-making process to take longer and involve more meetings and correspondence
- Be patient, even when opinions diverge
- Check in with your counterparts regularly to show your commitment
- Cultivate informal contacts within the team to monitor the progress of decision-making
- Resist the temptation to push for a quick decision

On the other hand, if you are working with a group of people who favour a more individualist approach to decision-making, these techniques might be useful:

- Expect decisions to be made by one person (often the boss) with less discussion
- Be ready to follow a decision that does not include your input
- If you are in charge, solicit input but strive to make decisions quickly
- When the group is divided, suggest a vote
- Remain flexible, decisions are rarely set in stone

If your team includes members from both a consensual and unilateral decision-making culture, problems could be avoided by explicitly discussing and agreeing upon a decision-making method during the early stages of collaboration. Consider defining the parameters of the ultimate decision: whether it should be by vote or by the boss; whether 100 percent agreement is needed; and how open the group will be to later changes. The more those on both sides of the cultural divide talk to each other, the more natural it becomes to adjust to one another.

Find article at

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