Cultural Brokers Boost the Creative Performance of Diverse Teams

By Sujin Jang , INSEAD

Multicultural individuals often play a key role in bridging cultural worlds.

Cultural diversity in business is lauded for its many **advantages**, but it can also act as a barrier to team effectiveness. On the one hand, members of multicultural teams bring with them a diversity of valuable perspectives, knowledge and ideas, but on the other hand, their different cultural norms and beliefs can erect barriers to understanding or even cause conflict. Given the double-edged nature of cultural diversity, how can multicultural teams leverage their strengths to generate creative outcomes while avoiding the pitfalls of cultural diversity?

Collective creativity in diverse teams is a kind of black box: We have a good idea of what goes in it (e.g. team composition) and what comes out of it (e.g. **creativity**), but we know very little about the process – what actually happens when people from different cultures work together. In order to illuminate this process, my paper, **"Cultural Brokerage and Creative**

[**Performance in Multicultural Teams**](#)**”**, published in *Organization Science*, examines how the cultural backgrounds of team members interact to shape team dynamics and outcomes.

I propose that within diverse teams, individuals who have a multicultural background can play a key role as cultural brokers – bridges between different cultures – allowing the team to leverage their diversity for enhanced creative performance. Cultural brokerage is defined as the act of facilitating interactions between individuals across cultural boundaries. I find that multicultural people often engage in cultural brokerage voluntarily to help their monocultural counterparts, independent of any formal leadership role they may have.

Creativity is enhanced when knowledge, perspectives and ideas from different sources are brought together and combined. To gain insight on this alchemy in the context of multicultural teams, I conducted two studies.

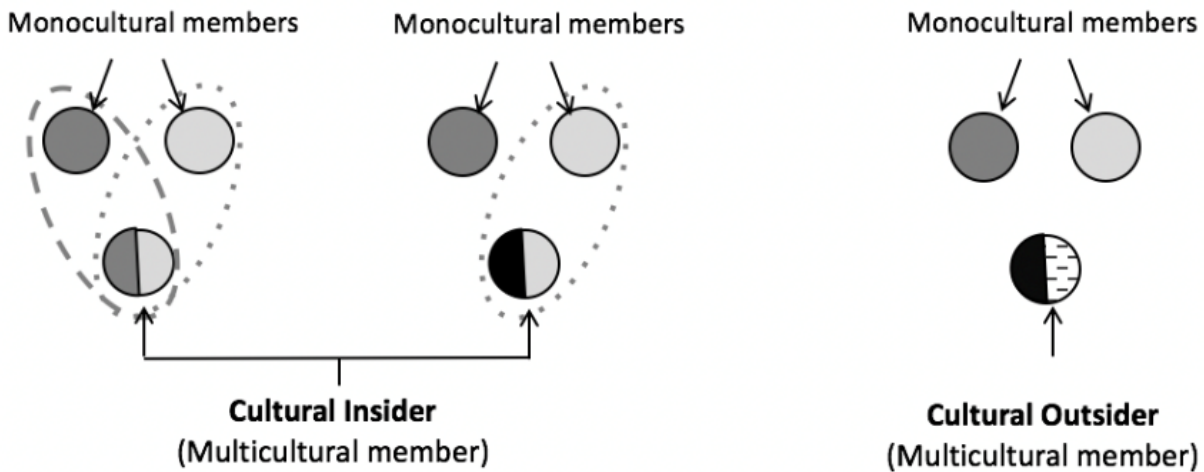**Two types of multiculturals: Cultural insiders vs. cultural outsiders**

The first study drew on archival data from a global business student competition. Teams of undergraduate and graduate students from more than 40 countries had eight weeks to come up with a business plan proposing the "next big idea" for a company of their choice. The final dataset included 2,117 teams (averaging six students per team) that participated in the competition over five years. Multiple instructors evaluated each business plan. These evaluations were then compared with the team cultural composition. The data showed that within diverse teams, the presence of multicultural members significantly enhanced the teams' creative performance.

To gain further insight into how the multicultural members' cultural background interacts with those of other team members, multicultural individuals were further categorised as a:

-*cultural insider* if they shared a cultural background with one or more other team members (for example, a French American in a team of French and American members), or as a

-*cultural outsider* if they had no common background with anyone else on their team (for example, a French American in a team of Chinese and Australian members).
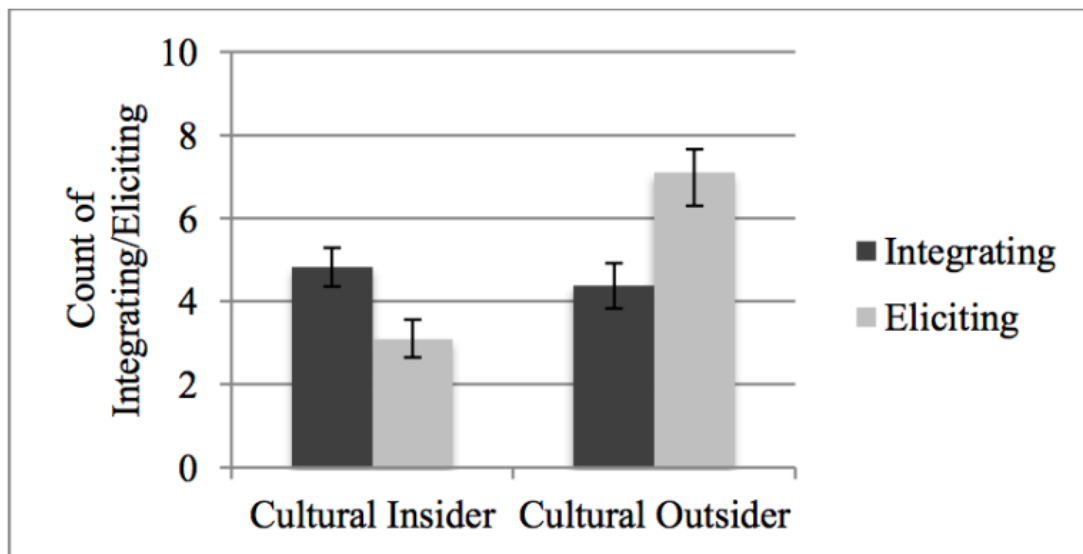
The figure below illustrates the difference.

Contrary to common expectations, cultural outsiders were just as effective as insiders at enhancing the creative performance of their team. I found that teams with one or more multicultural members, *regardless of whether they were cultural insiders or outsiders*, outperformed teams devoid of multicultural individuals.

Two types of cultural brokerage: Integrating vs. eliciting

In a second experimental study, I sought to examine the actual processes involved in cultural brokerage. To this end, 83 teams of three people were assembled: Each team included two distinct monocultural members and a multicultural individual who was either a cultural insider or outsider relative to the other members.

These teams were asked to propose creative ideas for a multicultural wedding that incorporated elements of the cultures of the two monoculturals on the team. The team members collaborated on an online platform to generate ideas for a special ritual, a musical performance and a prepared dish.

The main aim of this study was to gain insight into how cultural insiders and outsiders enact cultural brokerage. I found that insiders and outsiders enacted cultural brokerage in different ways: Cultural insiders primarily brokered by *integrating* ideas from different cultures, whereas cultural outsiders primarily brokered by *eliciting* ideas from different cultures, as shown in the graph below.

To clarify, integrating consists of directly combining, or synthesising, information, ideas or knowledge from varied perspectives into a novel whole. For example, in the experimental study, one of the participants proposed to have the song "Here comes the bride" played on Indian instruments, integrating elements of both American and Indian cultures. Meanwhile, eliciting is a more participatory process in which the cultural broker draws out cultural information, ideas or knowledge from team members by asking pertinent questions. For example, in the experimental study, participants elicited by asking questions such as: "Are there any special musical performances in India that are considered to be traditional for weddings?" or "What is a famous wedding song to be playing at an American wedding" (note: unedited participants' quotes).

Both types of cultural brokerage enhanced the creative performance of the team as a whole. In fact, integrating and eliciting jointly explained 28 percent of the variance in team creative performance.

Interestingly, integrating and eliciting only improved team creativity when enacted by a multicultural individual. In fact, monocultural members' engagement in integrating had no effect on team creative performance. And in a surprising twist, I found that monoculturals' eliciting efforts led to a significant decrease in team creative performance. This suggests that cultural brokerage doesn't always lead to positive outcomes, and that the source of cultural brokerage is a powerful determinant of its impact on team creativity.

Implications for organisations

The findings of this study illustrate that when people from diverse cultures are called to work together, they do not navigate their differences in isolation . Specifically, those with multicultural backgrounds often emerge as cultural brokers and help their monocultural counterparts, positively influencing team performance.

This suggests that organisations would benefit from recognising that such dynamics are taking place, even though they typically appear nowhere in formal job descriptions or organisational charts.

Furthermore, organisations would do well to think about the conditions they could put in place to facilitate cultural brokerage. While multicultural individuals are well-suited to fill the role of cultural broker, they need time and space to do so, as well as an organisational culture that is conducive to cultural brokerage. For example, it may be helpful to give recognition or status to potential cultural brokers, as they are not always the most senior person in their team.

Every organisation's context is different. However, all firms stand to gain by leveraging the diverse knowledge and perspectives of their increasingly multicultural teams. While unlocking the creative potential of multicultural teams is a complex and multifaceted endeavour, the findings from this research suggest that cultural brokerage is an important piece of the puzzle.

Find article at

https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/cultural-brokers-boost-creative-performance-diverse-teams

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About the author(s)

Sujin Jang is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. Her research seeks to illuminate the challenges and pitfalls of cross-boundary collaborations, as well as how individuals, teams, and organisations can better navigate and reap the benefits of cross-boundary work.