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How to create a cohesive environment in multicultural organizations

Abdoulie Sarr and Arto Manninen

This article studies the multicultural organization from the perspective of MaBA (Maahanmuuttajat BisnesAkatemiassa). The article is written by Abdoulie Sarr (student) in collaboration with Arto Manninen (coach). According to research, the foundation on which every successful team is built must be based on trust, as it is an integral part of achieving our goals in having formidable teams. As defined by Dyer, “team building is an intervention conducted in a work unit as an action to deal with a condition (or conditions) seen as needing improvement” (Dyer 1977, p. 41). If anyone has an opportunity to ever work in a multicultural organization, they will notice that there is a need for building trust as the foundation of the team. With trust, commitment and absolute dedication to work, an organization can achieve its desired goals successfully.

Building up a great team is always tricky but once established, it is like concrete made of asphalt and cement which seems unbreakable once dried. Teamwork is much more challenging than building teams because teams usually include a group of people with different ideologies and mentalities. The differences between members of a team sometimes make it almost impossible for them to work together to achieve a common goal. The role of team leaders is to organize, direct, manage and supervise the activities of team members. The leaders' job becomes more challenging when they work in a team with members from different cultural backgrounds.

How team building plays a pivotal role in the MaBA group

The MaBA group is a multicultural class that consists of students of foreign origin who have earned university degrees in the field of business or commercial management in their home countries. The group is divided into two sub-groups, i.e. coach Arto Manninen's group and coach Maria Havia's group.

To understand the implications of this statement, one needs to fully understand what team building means. Smith's (1985, cited in Adair 1986) metaphoric description of a team suggests that people or employees are like jigsaw puzzle pieces that fit together without distortion and that, once the puzzle is completed, produce an overall pattern.

Considering that the MaBA group of the Business Academy of Turku University of Applied Sciences comprises students from 17 different countries, one should note that team building is an integral part of the coaches' role in order to make sure that students from multicultural backgrounds can come together and study under one roof. In the beginning, the task was daunting and still remains a big challenge for the coaches because it is a new initiative undertaken by the Business Academy to introduce immigrants in Finland with a university background in the field of business to study at Turku University of Applied Sciences. The cultural differences have been a big issue and, in a way, affected the team building process because most of us fail to understand that in every culture, every individual has a different approach to tasks.

In a multicultural learning environment, one should be aware with the fact that tolerance, patience and willingness to understand the diversities and accept differences between people is the best way to create a better team. The MaBA team has faced a lot of challenges in building the team due to factors beyond the control of the coach and team members, which led to the resignation of the first team leader.

Factors that affected the team building process

Cultural differences

Cultural diversity issues are believed to be more of a problem than a solution. However, we prefer to argue by saying that the cultural differences help teams to have more divergent views, which in its turn encourages creativity and innovativeness in a multicultural setting. Imagine putting up a formidable team with a multinational background backed by a smart coach in order to form a functional cooperative that consists of a wide range of talents from almost all around the world. Achievements of such a team may be manifold, for instance, in the areas of innovativeness, creativity and project implementation.

Ineffective team leadership

According to Chemers (1997, p. 1), leadership is the “process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task”.

If a leader fails to persuade, influence and support the team to achieve a common goal, this renders them ineffective. Highlighted below are a few characteristics of an ineffective team leader:

- inability to persuade others
- lack of humility
- lack of tolerance to divergent views
- inability to see the bigger picture
- not delegating responsibilities to appropriate individuals
- inability to keep conversations in line with subject matter.

Conflict

When things seem not to be working, the team interactions are almost non-existent, which may lead to a non-functional team. Power struggle within a team between its members usually creates trouble. As a matter of fact, we are from different countries and different cultural backgrounds, which resulted in disputes during our meetings. However, after all of us disagreed to agree.

Conclusion

The MaBA team members should be more open-minded, accept differences and diversities in culture and be ready to teach and learn from others in order to create a just team. It is a fact that team building has been a challenge for the MaBA group as well. As the MaBA group was building the team spirit, the following observations were made:

- Team leaders in collaboration with team members have a set of agreeable rules that should be abided by all members within the team. It is vital that each team member is involved when setting up the ground rules for team play. After the rules has been set, they need to be clearly displayed in order to remind members to truly act by the rules.
- Team members should respect each other as well as understand and accept others' cultural backgrounds. Cultural diversity must be embraced and we have to learn to tolerate each other.
- MaBA team members should have a team spirit and work towards a common and achievable goal in accordance with the Business Academy concept.

In a multicultural learning environment, one should be aware with the fact that tolerance, patience and willingness to understand the diversities and accept differences between people is the best way to create a better team.

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