Cross-cultural team working within

The Cochrane Collaboration

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Summary

This document reviews some of the key issues relating to international team working within The Cochrane Collaboration, and provides a helpful insight into the challenges and benefits of this aspect of the Collaboration. It will be useful to anyone who works with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, either in a face-to-face context or through remote team working. The aim of the document is to help you to develop a better understanding of the factors that influence successful cross-cultural communication and international team working. It will also provide you with some guidelines on how to maximise your effectiveness when working in an international team. A glossary of terms has been included for those words shown in red. Some of the main points raised are:

International team working is key to the promotion of the principles of The Cochrane Collaboration. For example, it promotes the sharing of information and experience as well as assisting in the dissemination of methodologies adopted by the Collaboration. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of cross-cultural teams has been found to encourage innovation.

- The value systems between cultures have been shown to vary significantly. People from different cultural backgrounds are likely to have different attitudes towards hierarchy, ambiguity, achievement-orientation, time and working with others.

- Differences in value systems can impact upon how effectively individuals work together. Other factors that may impact on the effectiveness of an international team include communication differences, individuals' use of stereotypes and preconceptions, the use of technology and approaches to time management.

Section 4 of the document gives some suggestions as to how to overcome the difficulties of international team working. Some of the ideas included are:

- Avoid making assumptions or instant judgements about individuals or their working style.

- Take time to check out issues of culture that you are unsure of. Get to know a little about a country and its customs before visiting.

- Before communicating information think about how it might be received and take time to ensure that you have been clearly understood - put yourself in the other person's position.

- Think about your method of communication: e-mails can easily be misunderstood; they are not suitable for sensitive and difficult

messages.

- When organising meetings, set up ground rules and pay particular attention to accommodating individuals who will be using their second language during the meeting.

- Take time to get to know individuals' preferred working styles and look to see how you can build on individuals' strengths.

Glossary

(Definitions taken from Oxford Compact Dictionary & Thesaurus)

The following definitions are provided for words shown in red in this document. It is also worth noting that words and expressions can have quite different meanings in translation. For example, in Italian the words *triviale* (trivial), *infatti* (in fact), *libreria* (library), *editore* (editor) have different meanings in English. Also, in Italian, to say "I broke my leg" has the same meaning as "I have broken my leg". This is not so in English: the first phrase indicates that the leg was broken in the distant past; the second phrase indicates that the leg was broken recently.

Agenda
A list of items to be discussed at a meeting; a list of matters to be dealt with.

Bcc'ing
Copying a letter or e-mail to somebody without the knowledge of the addressee(s). 'Blind carbon copy' derives from the time when copies of documents were made using carbon paper.

Bias
An opinion or tendency to be strongly for or against a person or thing.

Cc'ing
Copying a letter or e-mail to somebody. ('Cc' is the abbreviation of 'carbon copy'; see '**bcc'ing**' above).

Colloquialism
A form of expression used in everyday conversation (i.e. not formal or literary), which might not be understood in other settings or languages.

Compartmentalise
To divide into categories or sections.

Cross-cultural
Across different cultures.

Ethos
The characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community.

Hierarchy
A classification of things according to their relative importance.

Monochronic
Attending to one task at a time.

Polychronic
Attending to several tasks at the same time.

Preconception
A previous opinion formed without actual knowledge.

Rapport
A close relationship in which people understand each other and communicate well.

Status quo
The existing state of affairs.

Stereotype
An over-simplified idea of the typical characteristics of a person or thing.

Introduction

This document will be useful to anyone who works with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, either in a face-to-face context or through remote team working. The aim of the document is to help you to develop a better understanding of the factors that influence successful cross-cultural communication and international team working. It will also provide you with some guidelines on how to maximise your effectiveness when working in an international team.

The Cochrane Collaboration's international status and the nature of its work mean that colleagues from different backgrounds and cultures are often working together on collaborative projects. This document aims to give you, as a member of the Collaboration, a better understanding of cultural differences and some of the issues you or your colleagues may face when working in an international team. The document focuses on differences in working style and how these can be problematic but also very beneficial within international teams.

The document is divided into four sections:

1. Defining culture.
2. The benefits of international team working.
3. The difficulties of working in an international team.
4. Overcoming the difficulties of working in an international team.

The document is by no means exhaustive and is not intended to be prescriptive. You may find that you are familiar with much of the material discussed here, and feel that you already have effective ways to deal with the issues highlighted. Nevertheless, we hope this document will raise your awareness of cross-cultural issues further, and provide you with more suggestions to help you to increase your effectiveness within international teams.

1. Defining culture

Culture is a very complex subject encompassing a variety of aspects of everyday life including art, music, philosophy and customs. When discussing cross-cultural differences in a work context it is usual to talk about culture in terms of issues such as a group's belief systems, their everyday behaviour and their values; in other words, the issues that impact on their working style and working relationships. The group itself may be a specific ethnic or religious group or a particular nationality.

For the purposes of this document we will be discussing international differences, but many of the points raised will apply regardless of the type of cultural group you are referring to.

A point to bear in mind when reading through the following sections is that organisational culture plays a big part in determining how individuals behave within the workplace. The Cochrane Collaboration has a strong ethos and set of values that affect its culture. This culture, as well as national culture will influence what individuals within the Collaboration view as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. As individuals tend to be attracted to organisations that reflect their own values, it is likely that most people within The Cochrane Collaboration will be able to relate to the organisation's values. However, as noted in Section 4, cross-cultural difficulties can often arise as a result of individuals making assumptions regarding how similar other people are to them. Although there may be much commonality between members of the Collaboration you cannot assume that people have the same beliefs, values or priorities as you.

2. The benefits of international team working

Anecdotal and research evidence demonstrates that there are real benefits to groups of people from different cultural backgrounds working together. The specific nature of those benefits varies from one individual to the next, depending on personal circumstances and the organisation you work for. Within the context of The Cochrane Collaboration the benefits of international team working can be divided into three categories:

a. Benefits to you
You may feel that you benefit in many more or different ways to the benefits outlined below. We have provided here some of the key benefits of international team working often cited by team members.

Increased knowledge - Working with people from different backgrounds exposes you to a wider variety of experiences and knowledge than you may have the opportunity to access in your home environment. It also helps you to keep up to date with healthcare issues and progress at an international level.

Broader skills – Being part of an international team can greatly enhance your interpersonal skills and give you a broader perspective.

A valuable experience – As more and more work teams cross national boundaries, having experience of working within an international context is becoming increasingly important. Experience of working as part of an international team within The Cochrane Collaboration may be very useful to you in future roles.

b. Benefits to The Cochrane Collaboration

One of the key principles of The Cochrane Collaboration is collaboration. Encouraging international team working helps the achievement of that principle. Some of the other benefits to the organisation are listed below. As you will note, many of these clearly link to The Cochrane Collaboration's principles.

Common goal – International communication within The Cochrane Collaboration helps to ensure that everyone remains focused on the same goals and objectives.

Keeping up to date – Encouraging individuals to collaborate internationally, rather than working only within their home country, helps the Collaboration ensure that all of its members are sharing knowledge. Access to this wide range of information helps everyone to keep their work up to date and of high quality.

Benefit of others' experience – Communication between Cochrane members helps to avoid duplication and maximise economy of effort. Having people from different backgrounds working together on projects and reviewing each others' work helps to minimise bias.

Greater creativity – Research shows that heterogeneous groups are more creative than homogenous groups. Heterogeneous groups tend to consider issues from a broader range of perspectives than homogenous groups and so generate a wider range of ideas.

Continuous improvement – Heterogeneous groups often question each other more than homogenous groups; frequent challenge of the status quo helps to ensure that opportunities for improvement are always considered.

Wider participation – International team working enables those individuals working in countries where Cochrane Collaboration methodologies are new to get support and assistance to help them to promote the Collaboration. Without international team working it would be far more difficult to establish and sustain Cochrane Collaboration activity in these countries. International team working helps us all to better understand the difficulties of promoting Cochrane methodologies within different cultures and countries. Better understanding and sharing of experiences will help the Collaboration to provide appropriate support to individuals and groups. In turn this will help the Collaboration to promote its methodologies worldwide.

c. Benefits to users of *The Cochrane Library* and healthcare consumers

Ultimately, consumers benefit from all of the points raised above. However, there a couple of additional benefits of international team working that are particularly relevant to consumers:

Greater relevance – Not surprisingly, research has shown that international team working helps to increase the flexibility and responsiveness of the organisation. In terms of The Cochrane Collaboration, international teams should help to ensure that the organisation is focusing on the most appropriate healthcare issues at an international level, and that appropriate consideration is given to local needs and requirements. They also help to ensure that these issues are addressed and presented in a way that is relevant to people making choices in health care.

Promoting access – International team working promotes the work of the Collaboration at an international level that has a direct impact on dissemination of the organisation's outputs. Not only is it likely to influence availability of information it is also likely to impact on the way in which information is presented.

3. The difficulties of working in an international team

Whilst there are huge benefits to international team working, working with people from different backgrounds is not always straightforward. It can often be the source of those difficulties that make those experiences so valuable, but that does not necessarily make it any easier. Some of the key areas that international teams often experience problems in are discussed in this section.

Different value systems

One of the ways in which cultures differ is in their underlying value systems. Peoples' values are expressed through what they say and what they do. Therefore people working together from different cultural backgrounds may find that they approach and execute tasks differently because of differences in their cultural values.

As noted in Section 2, having people within a team who have different perspectives and styles can be extremely valuable; however, different approaches have to be recognised, understood and fully utilised if they are to benefit the team.

Too often differences in style are simply seen as problems to be solved (usually by encouraging everyone to work in the same way). Understanding differences in value systems helps us to understand how and why individuals may behave differently to ourselves. This can help us work more effectively together and make the most of the benefits that those differences offer.

A number of models have been proposed to explain how the value systems of countries differ. The most frequently cited model is that proposed by Hofstede[1]. He suggests five fundamental dimensions to national culture. These can be summarised as:

1. Hierarchy – Hofstede calls this dimension 'power distance'; it relates to the extent to which individuals within a culture accept unequal distribution of power. At one end of this continuum are cultures that value hierarchy. In these cultures, the emphasis is placed on leader status; individuals will expect the team leader to provide direction and make decisions. Individuals within these cultures tend to be accepting of rules and questioning authority may be discouraged.

At the other end of the continuum are cultures that place a lot of emphasis on team involvement, with wide consultation and group decision-making being common. Questioning authority is likely to be accepted or even encouraged in these cultures.

2. Ambiguity - This dimension, labeled by Hofstede as 'Uncertainty Avoidance' deals with the degree to which individuals feel comfortable with ambiguity. At one end of the continuum are cultures that encourage risk taking; in these cultures individuals are likely to feel very comfortable trying new and different ways of approaching things. At the other end of the continuum are cultures that place more value on routine, regulation and formality. Individuals in these cultures are likely to prefer tried and tested ways of doing things rather than taking risks with unknown methodologies.

3. Individualism - This dimension relates to the extent to which the individual values self-determination. In an individualistic culture people will place a lot of value on individual success and the need to look after oneself. At the other end of the dimension are collectivist cultures in which individuals will place more value on group loyalty and serving the interests of the group.

4. Achievement-orientation – Hofstede describes one end of this dimension as masculine and the other end as feminine because it relates to values that have traditionally been associated with gender in western society. A culture at the masculine end of the continuum will be very achievement-oriented, valuing things such as success, achievement and money. At the other end of the continuum are cultures that place more value on aspects such as quality of life, interpersonal harmony and sharing.

5. Long-term orientation – This dimension was a later addition to Hofstede's work. At one end of the continuum are cultures that focus on long-term rewards; at the other end are cultures that are more concerned with immediate gain.

Hofstede suggests that a country's cultural values are reflected along a continuum of these five dimensions. Individuals' expectations and behaviours are likely to be influenced by their country's cultural values. For example, according to his research, team members from a country that is low

on power distance, low on uncertainty avoidance and high on individualism are likely to:

- Expect to take a role in deciding the team's direction.
- Be prepared to question a team leader's decisions.
- Feel comfortable trying different approaches.
- Focus on achieving their own personal goals, with the view that successful completion of those will facilitate group success.

On the other hand, team members from a country that is high on power distance and low on individualism are likely to:

- Expect a clear hierarchical team structure, with a clear team leadership.
- Be highly disciplined.
- Focus on providing support to other team members to ensure that the overall team outcome is achieved.

The dominant value system of a country is not always at the extreme of one end of the continuum. For example, one country in Hofstede's research falls somewhere in the middle of the power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions, suggesting a strong need for hierarchy, but also a tendency to break rules when needed.

Hofstede's framework is useful to help us to think about how misunderstandings may occur within work teams. For example, imagine an international team that is being led by someone from a cultural background that values hierarchy. That leader may expect to make decisions without consulting her/his team members. This may damage the relationship with those team members from cultures at the opposite end of the continuum who expect to be consulted and make joint decisions.

Hofstede's research provides some very interesting findings, but, as even he acknowledges, his work does have limitations. Although his studies were comprehensive and many of his findings have been replicated to some extent by other researchers, his work is, nonetheless, focused at quite a general and superficial level.

The most important point to remember when considering Hofstede's work is that from his findings he suggests the *dominant* value systems within countries. You cannot assume that everyone you meet from a country will hold a particular set of values.

The value of Hofstede's framework is that it provides a useful tool for thinking about culture and how values impact upon behaviour. As mentioned in Section 1, The Cochrane Collaboration itself has a strong culture; it's interesting to think about where the Collaboration sits in view of Hofstede's dimensions. As the values of individuals within the Collaboration are likely to be aligned, to some extent, with the values of the organisation, it is likely that for each of Hofstede's dimensions one extreme will be more prevalent within the Collaboration than the other, irrespective of the nationality of members. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider the dominant value systems of the countries that your colleagues are based in and to consider how these may impact on their behaviour.

However, perhaps the biggest learning point one can gain from reviewing research into value systems is a better understanding of one's own personal values and how those values impact on your working style and working relationships.

Preconceptions and stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalisations that help us to simplify, classify and make sense of the world. They occur when we infer qualities about a person based on evidence of a single characteristic. For example, we may assume that because someone has red hair they are very temperamental. This assumption is likely to be based on our previous experience of people with red hair or from information we have gathered from the media or other people about individuals with red hair.

The problem is of course that stereotypes do not always apply. It is certainly not the case that all people with red hair have bad tempers. We are most likely to hold stereotypes about groups of people who we do not perceive to be like us and of whom we have limited experience.

Difficulties start to occur when we use stereotypes to prejudge in the absence of evidence. If we always have our stereotypes in mind then our tendency is only to attend to information we receive that supports our view and to disregard information that goes against our stereotype.

If we use stereotypes when we are communicating with people these can operate like self-fulfilling prophecies in that they lead us to act towards people in a way that brings out the trait we expect them to have.

It is easy to see that referring to stereotypes or letting them influence our behaviour can significantly impact upon our relationships with others, usually in a negative way.

Individual decision-making and problem solving

Differences in individuals' value systems, educational backgrounds and work experience will all impact on how they approach problems and how they make decisions. For example, some people like to make decisions on their own, whilst others prefer to involve a range of people and gain a solution that everyone has agreed to. Some people will spend a lot of time gathering all of the available evidence and checking out options and risks before giving a response to a problem, whilst other people may be keen to make a quick decision.

Differences in problem-solving and decision making style can easily lead to misunderstandings within teams. The important point to note is that no one approach is better than another; different styles are appropriate in different situations. It is important to be able to recognise when others are using a different style to you. To be effective within any team it is important for everyone to be able to use a range of decision making and problem solving styles.

Communication

Effective communication is critical within any work team. Within an international team it is often the area that individuals have the most difficulty with. There are a number of aspects of communication that can cause problems when working with people from different backgrounds. Two of the most common ones are discussed below.

1. Language

Language problems may occur if all individuals within a team do not use the same first language. In these situations, for ease of communication, the team often chooses a common language that they can use for group communications. Language differences between individuals can occur at two different levels:

a. Vocabulary - Confusion can arise if individuals simply do not understand one another in terms of the language being used; difference in vocabulary, , pronunciation, use of slang and idioms can all cause problems.

b. Language style - Different styles of language can also lead to difficulties in comprehension. For example, some people may be very direct, whilst others are indirect; some may be expansive whilst others are succinct. Over-evaluation of individuals' style of language can lead to a misunderstanding of their intent.

2. Non-verbal behaviours

Gestures form a significant part of methods of communication. However, there are few if any universal gestures. Non-verbal behaviours or 'body language' vary considerably from one culture to another. For example, a high level of eye contact is considered a sign of attentiveness in some cultures and a sign of rudeness in others. In some cultures individuals are encouraged to express their emotions openly, whilst in others openly demonstrating feelings is discouraged. These differences in body language can lead to misunderstandings between people of different cultural backgrounds.

Over a period of time it may be possible to learn some of the key differences between cultures in terms of body language. But the range of non-verbal behaviours we all use and the subtle differences between our behaviours means it would be difficult to produce a comprehensive list of

all of the differences between cultures, let alone learn and remember them. Another problem is that much non-verbal behaviour is very subtle; as we tend to only see, hear, feel and smell those things that have some meaning to us, we are likely to miss much of the non-verbal behaviour expressed within other cultures.

Using technology

The geographical distances that often exist between international team members means that technology plays an important role in enabling individuals to communicate on a regular basis. Telephones and video-conferencing allow geographically disparate individuals to communicate verbally, whilst e-mail and faxes enable fast, efficient communication 'out of hours'. However, using technology for communication does have difficulties. Problems with incompatible technology or lack of access to appropriate technology can mean that some individuals do not receive all of the information they need to be able to perform effectively. Furthermore our increasing dependence on fast communication methods that do not involve face-to-face contact, such as e-mail, can lead to misunderstandings. This is because removing face-to-face contact limits opportunity for recipients to observe the expression and tone of the message, and for communicators to check understanding and ask questions.

Attitudes to time

Polychronic and monochronic behaviours are ways of defining different attitudes towards dealing with time. Treating time with a monochronic attitude results in attempting to do only one task at a time, whereas those individuals who treat time with a polychronic attitude typically regard time as a naturally recurring phenomenon that can be used for many purposes at once.

Individuals with a monochronic attitude to time will tend to compartmentalise their time, allocating specific times to specific tasks, and will focus on one task before moving onto the next. However, someone with a polychronic attitude to time will tend to multi-task, attempting several tasks at the same time.

The issue for international teams is that attitude towards time is thought to vary between cultures. For example, monochronic time is the traditional Western attitude towards time. This attitude is thus encouraged and reinforced across many westernised cultures and is even reflected in the language, with phrases such as 'one step at a time'. Polychronic time is the traditional Latin-American representation of time; therefore in Latin American businesses doing several tasks at once are likely to be the norm. Problems can occur for international teams if different team members have different attitudes towards time; for example, someone with a monochronic attitude to time may feel that a colleague displaying polychronic behaviours seems disorganised, and may feel frustrated when that person seems reluctant to keep to a specific time for meetings; in contrast the person with a polychronic attitude to time may get frustrated with colleagues displaying monochronic behaviours, particularly when they seem reluctant to take time out on an ad hoc basis to discuss pressing issues.

4. Overcoming the difficulties of working in an international team

One of the principles of The Cochrane Collaboration is to increase diversity and so we do not want to enforce a uniform way of working. As discussed, the variety of working styles that cross-cultural team members bring to a team is a bonus, not a disadvantage.

The Collaboration wants everyone to have an understanding of how cross-cultural differences impact on the work environment and how these can be managed so that the benefits of those differences can be maximised both for the individual and the group.

This section gives some ideas on how to approach international team working to help both yourself and your colleagues work most effectively. You will note that many of the suggestions are common sense. The solutions to effective international team working are not difficult; the challenge is remembering to always apply them – even when under pressure.

Some general principles

Avoid making assumptions – Don't assume things about an individual or a group: take time to get to know people and find out the correct information. We all hold preconceptions and we all hold

stereotypes; the important thing is to not allow them to influence our behaviour. Stay aware of your preconceptions and treat them as hypotheses, not as facts. Your instinct may have been right on the previous nine occasions – it does not mean it's going to be right this time. Even if you know you have a lot in common with an individual you cannot infer that you will share other interests or opinions.

If you are unsure, check it out – If you are not sure of a particular custom within a country, how to pronounce someone's name, or whether the written document you have put together is going to be understood, then ask someone for help. All too often we struggle along because we're embarrassed to ask or we're concerned about taking up other people's time. Generally people welcome the opportunity to share their culture. Asking questions early on can save awkwardness later; it would be embarrassing to discover six months into a project that you had been pronouncing a team member's name incorrectly.

Equal treatment – It's not enough to treat everyone the same, you should aim to treat people as individuals and as they would want to be treated (not necessarily the same as the way you would want to be treated).

Don't worry if you make a mistake – It's impossible to remember all of the differences in customs and cultures; the important point is that you make the effort to build better relationships with your international colleagues. If you make a mistake, apologise and learn from it, but don't let it stop you from gaining international experience or working with people from different backgrounds.

Build on people's strengths – We all have strengths and we all have weaknesses. The benefit of any team is that everyone will have different strengths and experiences; the diversity of these experiences is likely to be even greater in an international team. Take time to get to know all team members' strengths and make the most of them.

Share information – Building relationships is a two-way process. If you are working with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds then try to be open about sharing information about your own culture so that they can get a better understanding of your background. For example, let people know if there are certain customs that should be obeyed within your culture and inform people of important holidays or religious days. Try to be open to questions people may ask of you – but also let people know if you are uncomfortable with the questions they are putting to you (even if you have to do this through a third party).

Avoid making instant judgements – We tend to make immediate evaluations based on our own culture, rather than trying to comprehend thoughts and feelings from the other person's point of view; we assume our own culture or way of life is the most natural. For example, it is easy to make judgements about an individual's level of commitment to a project based on the communications they send, their contributions to team meetings and the amount of time they are dedicating to the project. Measures of commitment vary from one culture to the next and from one individual to the next. Try to see the project from the other person's point of view before you judge their performance or contribution.

Issues of communication

REMEMBER: The receiver, not the sender, defines communication.

Face-to-face/oral communication

Before communicating information:

Think about what you are going to say. How will your words be received? Will the receiver get the message you intend?

Remember that humour and ways of giving feedback differ hugely between cultures. For example, in some cultures it is common for individuals to receive lots of feedback on their performance (both positive and negative) – in other cultures individuals rarely receive feedback. Just because someone is not used to giving feedback does not mean you should not give it, but it does mean you should think even more carefully about how and when you give it.

Consider previous communications you have had with the person/people you are about to communicate with. Was there anything particular about their preferred style of communication? For example, do they like to spend time exchanging pleasantries or do they like to get straight to the point? You do not have to alter your style of communication completely to accommodate someone else's, but some accommodation and compromise can help you to build better rapport with people and make sure that you get your message across.

Making sure you are clearly understood:

When communicating verbally the best way to make sure your message has been understood in the way you intended is to ask the person you are talking to summarise what you have said to them. It is not sufficient simply to ask if a person understands you – they may think they have, but may actually taken away a different message to the one you intended.

Avoid using colloquialisms and words/phrases that are frequently misunderstood. Ask someone you trust to give you ongoing feedback on your use of language. For example, if you are aware that you often use colloquialisms without thinking about it, then ask him or her to point these out to you.

If you are speaking in your second language, ask someone to let you know if you pronounce something incorrectly or use a word/phrase inappropriately.

If someone is having difficulty understanding you, present the information in a different way - don't just speak louder.

If you feel strongly about something, say so. Don't expect someone to interpret your body language. Let people know if you are pleased, annoyed or confused by verbally explaining how you feel.

Sending written communications
Many of the points raised in the section 'Face-to-face/oral communication' also apply to written communication. Some of the additional points to consider are:

Think very carefully about how you use e-mail. It is not a medium to use if you have to communicate a difficult or sensitive message. For example, if you are having to give someone bad news or talk to them about a performance issue you should try to do it face-to-face or at least by telephone – even if you then follow up with an e-mail/letter to confirm what you have discussed.

Consider confidentiality – if you are sending sensitive information by e-mail or by letter – who has access to the individual's mail? Can you be sure that the intended recipient gets the information and that he/she is the only person to get it?

Be careful about copying and 'blind copying' (cc'ing and bcc'ing). If you are sending a sensitive message to someone via e-mail, think very carefully about whether you need to include anyone else in the message. You should try to inform the recipient of the message first and then check with them, or let them know who else is going to receive the information from you.
If sending a letter or e-mail think about when the recipient may receive that message – particularly when you may be working in different time zones. An individual may feel very differently about an e-mail giving them some negative feedback on a report they have written if they receive it at the beginning of a day rather than if they receive it at the end of a fraught day. The difficulty is that you can never be certain what frame of mind an individual will be in when they receive a written message – all the more reason to call them first if you have a difficult message to deliver.

Running and taking part in meetings
An important part of any meeting is ensuring that everyone has ample opportunity to contribute. This can be particularly difficult when the chosen language of the meeting is not the first language of all contributors. Taking the following steps can help to minimise the impact of language differences.

Send out a full agenda and all relevant documents for the meeting ahead of time to allow everyone to read through and consider the material at their own pace. Make sure the materials are sent out far enough in advance for people to have time to review them (for example, if an individual only receives the documents the day before the meeting and they are going to take a couple of hours to

read through, he/she is likely to find it difficult to find time at such short notice).
Take time to consider the layout of a meeting room. The Chairperson should be able to see everyone clearly. If anyone will be using their second language during the meeting consider sitting them close to the Chairperson; this makes it easier for him/her to ensure those people have adequate opportunity to contribute.

Have regular breaks and don't overload the agenda. Meetings are tiring and it can be difficult for people to give their full attention throughout long meetings. Even more concentration is required for someone using their second language. If you do need to have long meetings make sure you arrange regular breaks and stick to them. The meeting is likely to be more efficient if contributors feel fresh and alert and are able to stay focused.

Set ground rules at the start of a meeting; these should be discussed and agreed amongst the group, and should cover issues such as:

- timescales for the meeting
- agreement on the agenda items
- format of the meeting
- communication within the meeting (e.g. if time is short it may be worth emphasising the need to be succinct)
- responsibilities of the Chairperson and of other contributors (e.g. it is everyone's responsibility to stay focused on the agenda; the Chairperson has ultimate responsibility for ensuring everyone contributes, but everyone has a responsibility to speak up/listen to other contributors, etc.).
- other issues of meeting etiquette (e.g. in the interests of time, the Chairperson may sometimes need to progress to the next issue and so it may be necessary to cut short someone's contribution. It's worth highlighting this point and perhaps even discussing how the Chairperson will signal the need to move on, particularly in large meetings).

The Chairperson should be clear about his/her responsibilities and make these clear to the meeting. Ultimately it is his/her responsibility to facilitate the meeting, making sure that everyone contributes and that the agenda is adhered to within the timeframe for the meeting. As a Chairperson it is important to take time before the meeting to consider how you are going to run it. Think about the agenda items and how much time you estimate each item will take. It is also worth looking at which items are the priority items for the meeting and whether any of the issues are likely to be contentious. Also think about who will be attending the meeting, their relationships to each other and their relationship to the issues being discussed. Meetings do have to be flexible to some extent, you cannot predict all of the issues that will arise, but thinking about the agenda and the contributors in advance will help you to prepare for the meeting.

Teleconferencing

Clearly, the use of teleconferencing is not limited to situations involving cross-cultural team working, and the skills required by participants for a successful teleconference are very similar, irrespective of whether a range of cultures is represented. However, it is worth highlighting some of the issues that are likely to be particularly important to consider if the teleconference is taking place internationally and/or with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Preparation for the call

Time differences: If you are responsible for arranging the call, take time to consider the impact of time differences and, if possible, consult with individuals regarding their preference for the time of day the call takes place. This is particularly important if the call has to take place outside of office hours for some people. If the teleconference is one that is to happen on a regular basis, try to rotate the meeting time so that it is not the same people who are inconvenienced every time.

Technology: If you are organizing a teleconference it is important to take responsibility for ensuring that you have made the necessary arrangements regarding technology well ahead of schedule, and that you are clear on how to use any equipment or teleconferencing facility. Also take time to consider where you are going to take the call. Make sure you are in a quiet room where you will not be disturbed; audibility on international telephone lines can be poor, or there may be a delay on the lines. It is important to take all the steps you can to ensure that everyone can hear and be heard clearly throughout the call.

Agenda: Having a clear agenda that is easy to follow is even more important in a teleconference than in a face-to-face meeting. It is important to circulate the agenda ahead of the call, and to give people the opportunity to comment and give feedback in advance on issues for discussion, as this can save time during the teleconference.

The role of the Chairperson

The Chairperson plays a critical role in a teleconference and should pay particular attention to the following:

- Keeping to the agenda and making sure that everyone is following the format of the meeting.

- Ensuring everyone has an adequate opportunity to contribute. This can be difficult when you are unable to use visual cues to bring people into a discussion or to let people know that you need to move on. Setting up ground rules at the start of the meeting regarding how people put forward their views and how much time is to be dedicated to discussion of particular agenda items may help to manage individual contributions. Throughout the call the Chairperson will need to pay particular attention to who has contributed and who has not, and make sure that individuals are invited into the discussion.

- Keeping to time: Teleconferences should be clear, focused and conducted within a timeframe agreed in advance. It can be very difficult to concentrate on a conference call for a long period of time, particularly if you have less than perfect audibility or are taking part before or after your working day. To maximize the benefit of a teleconference, keep it relatively short and make sure you finish on time so that people do not start to lose concentration.

Participating in a teleconference

Socializing: At any face-to-face meeting at least a couple of minutes would be spent in social chat as people arrive and settle themselves down for the meeting. This chat can play an important role in helping the group to bond and get to know each other. For this reason it can be very useful to allow a couple of minutes at the start of a teleconference for social chat, so that the group does not miss out. This time can also be beneficial for individuals to check that they can hear all participants clearly and that the technology is working effectively.

Taking responsibility: It is important for all teleconference participants to take responsibility for contributing and putting forward their views succinctly and clearly during the call. Everyone needs to stay alert to the fact that some participants may not have a clear line or may be experiencing delays on the line that make listening to and participating in the call more difficult. It is important for individuals to say early on in the call if they are experiencing any technological problems or having difficulties hearing, so that these issues can be taken into consideration and if possible resolved.

Keeping to time: Although the Chairperson may have overall responsibility for keeping to the agenda and finishing the meeting on time, all teleconference participants should take responsibility for making sure that their own contributions are focused and relevant to the discussion. Individuals should also take responsibility for ensuring that they do not dominate the call or interrupt others whilst they are making their contributions.

In addition to the points raised above, many of the issues in the 'Face-to-face/oral communication' and 'Running and taking part in meetings' sections are relevant to teleconferencing situations and are worth taking into consideration.

Building relationships

When starting work within a new international team, take time to talk about everyone's preferred working style. It may feel like a waste of time initially but it could save a lot of misunderstandings later on. You will not be able to accommodate everyone's preferences all of the time, but having the discussion will help team members to understand each other and each others' situations a little

better. Types of things to discuss include:

- Individuals' preferred methods of communication (e.g. e-mail, phone)
- Individuals' preferred times for meetings/communications
- By what name individuals like to be called
- Individuals' working styles (e.g. do individuals like to work independently on a specific piece of a project? Do individuals like to consult with others before making decisions?)
- Learning points individuals have gathered from other team working experiences
- Anything else that team members feel is relevant to the discussion

Make sure you know how individuals like to be referred to. If you are unsure, ask. Take time to get the pronunciation and spelling of names correct.

Let your team members know the name that you like to be known by; if you use one name for informal correspondence (e.g. e-mail) and a different name for publications/formal correspondence, make that clear from the outset.

Check when people are prepared to receive telephone calls and/or to have meetings. Some people are more than happy to receive calls at the weekend or during the evening – other people are not. Although there are occasions when we all have to be flexible, it is important to respect individuals' work-life balance choices – these vary hugely by culture and also from one individual to the next.

If you are going to visit a country with which you are unfamiliar, spend some time gaining an understanding of that country and its customs. You don't have to do very much: just read the key points in a tourist guide, talk to others who have visited, or to people who live there. Find out how to say "please" and "thank you" in that language.

If people are visiting you from a different country, perhaps recommend something they can read before their arrival: a short booklet or website with key customs and cultural information is sufficient in most instances. Alternatively, let people know if there are key customs that they need to be aware of (for example, 'business dress' varies considerably from one country to another, and it is very useful for people to have some idea of what will be appropriate attire for their trip).

Conclusion

Working in an international team can be challenging. However, as this document shows, there are a number of simple steps that you can take to minimise the challenges and maximise the benefits of international team working. The key to many of the points raised above is taking the time to review and reflect. Think about the people you are working with, take time to get to know their working style and consider things from their point of view. Do not make assumptions and do not dismiss ideas; just because something did not work last time does not mean it will not work this time.

Being aware of cross-cultural differences and in particular our own attitudes, behaviours and biases is essential for effective international team working. But being aware is only part of the process, we also need to have the skills and consistently use those skills to ensure that we communicate and work effectively with people from different backgrounds. An important point to remember is that cross-cultural team working is not about minimising the differences between people, rather it is about making the most of the added value that a diverse team can offer.

Reference

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