

Savvy Managers Tune in to Cultural Differences

By Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe

In today's diverse workplaces, employees bring a wide range of cultural backgrounds that influence how close they stand to others, how loud they speak, how they deal with conflict—even how they participate in meetings. It's not surprising, then, that these cultural varying backgrounds can lead to misinterpretations of behavior, as well as conflict.

Consider the norm of hierarchy and status. As managers, we want everyone to feel valued and to participate in solving problems and making decisions. But being honest and offering ideas may be difficult for an employee who has been taught deference to age, gender or title because he doesn't want to be seen in the position of challenging the authority of an elder or boss.

Along with the norm of hierarchy and status, other important cultural norms that influence behavior are:

- Group versus individual orientation.
- Time consciousness.
- Communication.
- Conflict resolution.

For example, time-conscious managers may mistakenly view people whose cultures take a more relaxed view toward deadlines as being less committed to team goals, as well as less dependable, accountable and reliable. Or, consider the employee who nods "yes" but doesn't mean it. This individual may be simply operating according to his norm of communication in which one never says "No" to a boss.

At the same time, managers who are direct communicators expect a "tell it like it is" response from their subordinates. But when these employees are indirect communicators, they expect managers to read the contextual clues to understand their responses. In these cases, managers may need to hone their skills to pick up on nonverbal cues that may indicate when nodding and affirmative response are polite, face-saving gestures, not indications of agreement or understanding.

As you can see, it's important for managers to recognize the role that culture plays in interactions and to try to identify the critical elements of the cultures involved. Once you identify your preferences and expectations, you then can focus on the norms and preferences of your employees. Noting the cultural and preferential differences will help you avoid interpreting the behavior of your employees through the prism of your own cultural background.

Once you've identified the differences, you can search for alternate approaches that are more compatible with an employee's cultural background to get the information and effective communication you need. Here are some suggestions:

- Avoid yes/no questions, such as, “Is that clear?” or “Do you understand?” Instead, give the employee options from which to choose. Ask for specific information, such as, “Which step will you do first with this new procedure?”
- If time allows, perform the task along with the employee or watch to see how well he understands your directions.
- Try using passive language that focuses on the situation or behavior, rather than the individual. For example, instead of saying, “You must answer calls by the third ring,” say, “Calls must be answered by the third ring.”
- Give employees enough time to collect their thoughts before a meeting so they can feel prepared to bring input.
- Have employees work in small groups, generating ideas through discussion and presenting input as a group.

One of the most important functions of a manager is developing and grooming employees for promotion. Cross-cultural norms have a huge impact on this task because of the underlying assumptions a manager might make about an employee’s potential. To determine promotion potential, managers consider questions such as:

- How is initiative demonstrated?
- What behaviors show commitment?
- How much is high potential determined by accomplishing the task and how much is determined by good interpersonal skills?
- How do employees use and showcase their unique talents?

In answering these questions, managers who are aware of cultural differences will make fewer assumptions about the motivations and drive of certain employees. For example, “initiative” won’t necessarily be defined as acting without waiting for directions but defined as the ability to keep the group moving, to make some contribution and to help preserve harmony in the face of expected differences. “Commitment” may not be defined strictly in terms of meeting deadlines but also as encouraging further exploration of an issue or being more creative or flexible in striving to get the best outcome.

Managers who are aware of different cultural norms also are less likely to incorrectly interpret behaviors and prescribe ineffective courses of action when developing people. Toward this end, here are some suggestions for managers to consider:

- Teach employees to interpret the culture of the organization by pointing out factors such as how people dress, recreational patterns and the formality or informality of communication. Employees can make effective choices when they clearly understand the informal rules of the organizational culture.
- Help employees understand the difference between deadlines that are non-negotiable and those that are more elastic.
- Get an accurate sense of the person’s planning and organizational skills. Then, set clear expectations that help the employee perform better and build in follow-up sessions.
- Coach employees who are uncomfortable acknowledging their own individual work to talk about accomplishments through work group performance. As employees try to

move up, the need to sell oneself in an unassuming way as part of a work group is a comfortable way to show one's part in a group's accomplishment.

- Focus on relationship building. An employee can learn that giving a manager feedback is an act of loyalty and help. But this is a paradigm shift that requires rapport, safety and trust.

Conflict is difficult to manage for most of us, and it becomes more so when employees and managers have different rules about how to handle it. Some employees will prefer direct discussion of differences. Others will find this approach upsetting and disruptive. In addition, differences in attitudes toward status may influence how people deal with conflict.

Managers need to help employees recognize these differences and encourage them to share their preferences with each another. This proactive approach helps build a common base of understanding about the best ways to deal with each other. Here are some specific steps to resolve conflict in culturally appropriate ways:

- Hold team development sessions where employees can learn more about their own and each other's styles and preferences in terms of conflicts.
- In one-on-one sessions, help employees understand cultural differences that may underlie the conflicts they are experiencing.
- Consider using a third-party intermediary to help resolve conflict in a face-saving manner.
- Create a norm that says conflict is a normal part of any workplace and that resolving it requires give and take on all sides.
- Work to create solution strategies that meet both your objectives and those of your employee.

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