

MEDIA COVERAGE

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How to manage complexity in the global workplace

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As workplaces and organisations become more globalised, the skills to negotiate and manage people from diverse cultural and personal backgrounds will be critical. Leading companies will need to learn how to effectively manage multicultural workplaces, coordinate, motivate and ensure engagement from employees in overseas locations and among offices spanning multiple locations and time-zones.

Many organisations are currently attempting the transition from largely mono-cultural, male-led operations to more inclusive and diverse workforces. Work teams are also shifting from co-located, 9-5 service delivery to a global-virtual model where colleagues may be located in numerous offices across the country, region, or globe

Cultural diversity, when managed and leveraged effectively, can lead to greater creativity and higher business performance. Yet, it's not as easy as "getting the numbers" right or assuming the situation will take care of itself.

What can occur in multicultural workforces is the formation of "tribes" or in-groups which have little to no interaction with each other. These social groupings also then form the means of informal communication in the business, and preclude the formation of a common diverse 'team'.

For instance the Hong Kong Chinese all sit together, the mainland Chinese sitting somewhere else, Indians will sit with other Indians and the Australians will mainly associate with each other. People often find safety and comfort with others that are culturally similar to them, and fail to socialise, informally interact or share information with colleagues from different backgrounds.

To enable performance in newly diverse and global teams, we need to rethink process and create an environment where everyone has the capacity to contribute and work together harmoniously and productively. The process of "how" we work becomes increasingly significant. Leaders and managers have a critical role to create an environment which supports interaction, collaboration and the capacity to engage and achieve results among people from diverse backgrounds.

Here are some tips to help you to better manage cultural diversity in your organisation:

Encourage interactions rather than tribes

What's needed is the facilitation and expansion of interactions between these groups. This can be done by establishing a participatory structure so people have to regularly work with others they don't know. For instance, at meetings use a "rotating chair" to ensure all people are equally put in control so dominance from one group is minimised.

Ensure everyone understands the big picture

Communicating the company vision to the entire workforce is key. If your employees don't understand the organisation's goals and the road map to achieve them, they are at risk of heading in different directions. This vision should be reinforced on a regular basis.

Emphasise common ground

While cultural diversity acknowledges and celebrates difference, it is equally important to focus on shared and common values and practices. By highlighting and continually reiterating common ground, such as project objectives or organisational values, you can help to create better working relationships, collaboration and interaction. To reach out to colleagues on the basis of shared topics of interest in family, food or sport can be valuable and create a common basis from which to explore difference.

Implement intercultural learning to help employees negotiate change.

If employees have limited exposure or experience in negotiating cultural diversity, intercultural training, coaching and facilitation can assist. Promoting intercultural learning among employees will help them to understand their world-view and perspective and to develop behavioural flexibility. This will help them to be able to choose, from a position of understanding, how to approach a specific situation to negotiate differences and find common ground.