Intercultural Competence for Effective Group Performance

Pedagogiskt docenturarbete

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Background

Globalization has transformed the universities into a melting pot in which people of various ethnicities, cultures, and religious backgrounds can mingle and share information, knowledge, experiences, and wisdom. According to data from SCB (2018/2019), every fourth PhD student (approximately 25 percent) in Swedish universities is of a foreign origin. The number of foreign students is highest (30-35 percent) in the fields of medicine and health. A majority of the students (57 percent) are from other European countries, while 27 percent are Asians. Swedish universities attract prominent international researchers who enhance the quality and scope of the research being conducted in the Swedish universities. The rise in the number of students and faculty from beyond national borders is in concurrence with the Swedish government’s vision for Higher Education, as defined in the Swedish Government Official Reports, Higher Education, 2018:

Sweden shall be one of the most attractive, international knowledge nations with world leading quality of education and research. International understanding and intercultural competence shall constitute an unquestioned and integrated part of education and research. The internationalisation efforts of the higher education institutions are predicated upon constructive cooperation with the rest of society and efficient coordination between government agencies in order to overcome national and global challenges.

Cultural diversity in the teams operating in the university campuses has significant benefits but also creates certain challenges. To ensure successful team performance and gain a competitive advantage, a system of cultural adoption is necessary.

Cross-cultural teams: a handicap or a powerful seed for something new?

Cross-cultural teams are global in scope since they comprise people of different cultural backgrounds who bring with them different kinds of experiences. Such teams will generally enjoy higher productivity, since they can draw upon the varied skills, experiences, and problem-solving methods of the group members (Brunow and Nijkamp 2016). Diversity ensures that the team does not fall prey to groupthink while becoming blind to new and innovative ideas (Brodock and Massam 2016). Too much cohesiveness or homogeneity in a group can lead to rigidity, which might lead to insular thinking and become a stumbling block in the accomplishment of the team’s original goals (Gargiulo and Benassi 2000).

The primary challenge that the teams might face is related to culturally influenced attitudes—such attitudes can cause miscommunications, which if not dealt properly, can breed lack of cooperation and conflict between the team members. It is necessary to have tools which facilitate a better understanding of the cultural dynamics. With such tools, synergy can be achieved within the group, so that everyone can focus on realizing the goals of the research.

Culture is often a source of categorization and stereotyping. Hofstede (1980) has said: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from
another.” This view of culture might be simplistic, but it is widely cited and quite popular. The practice of equating culture with country is widespread, and this has led to a spate of stereotypical categorizations. It is unfortunate that the trend of equating cultural differences with misunderstandings, conflicts, and rivalries, instead of examining the avenues for synergy and assimilation, has become dominant in the field of literature. (Stahl and Tung 2015, Stahl and Maznevski 2021).

The positive aspects of cultural diversity have come to light in the research conducted in the later years. In a meta-analysis of 108 articles, conducted by 10,632 cross-cultural teams, it was discovered that cultural diversity led to rise in creativity, satisfaction, and communication effectiveness (McLeod and Lobel 1992, Stahl et al. 2010). These positive outcomes are probably the consequences of the differences in experiences, mental models, modes of perception, information processing, and approaches to problems that people coming from different cultures typically bring to any multicultural society. (Mannix and Neale 2005, Stevens et al. 2008)

Three individual-level factors which might make a difference in the performance of a culturally diverse group are (Stahl and Maznevski 2021): (1) Team members’ skills for working across cultures: Group members’ cross-cultural competence leads to effective communication, trust building and conflict management—this contributes to a high team performance (2) Members who are multicultural: In three studies performed on 1196 participants (Fitzsimmons 2017), it was shown that the team members who identify with and internalize more than one culture have a higher level of intercultural skills, and can engage in bridging behaviors, which have a positive impact on the team performance (3) behavior of the team leader. A combination of cultural awareness, global identity, and openness to cultural diversity in the team leaders results in more effective knowledge exchange (Lisak and Erez 2015).

What is Intercultural sensitivity and Intercultural competence

**Intercultural sensitivity** allows us to envision the world from different perspectives (worldviews) and learn about different ways of doing things. Bennett (2017), based upon his observations in the academic and corporate world, founded the framework of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS consists of six successive stages, which are in the form of a continuum. The first three stages are ethnocentric, meaning that one’s own culture is experienced as central to reality, these stages are: (1) denial of cultural difference (cultural difference is not perceived and one’s own culture is perceived as the only ‘real’ one), (2) defence against cultural difference (cultural difference is perceived in a stereotypical manner, demarcating into “us” and “them” where typically “us” is superior than “them”), (3) minimization of cultural difference (one’s own cultural worldview is perceived as universal). The last three stages of DMIS are ethnorelative, meaning one’s own culture is experienced in context to other cultures: (4) acceptance of cultural difference (being curious about and respectful of cultural difference), (5) adaptation to cultural difference (intercultural empathy) and (6) integration of cultural difference (one’s experience of self is expanded, to include the movement in and out of cultures, this stage is commonly experienced by long-term expatriates and non-dominant minorities).

**Intercultural competence** is the set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to communicate effectively with people from other cultures (Deardoff 2006). According to Chen (1989), there are four dimensions of intercultural competence: (1) personal attributes, (2) communication skills, (3) psychological adaptation, and (4) cultural awareness. The personal attributes comprise the ability of a person to know themselves (cultural awareness of oneself and others), communication skills
dimension includes the ability to communicate skillfully (listening, observing, interpreting). The psychological adaptation refers to the person’s ability to handle psychological feelings and the cultural awareness describes a person’s understanding of how environment shapes personal thinking.

It is important to note that intercultural competence takes time to develop since it involves self-reflection and assessment (Deardoff 2011).

Intersectionality as a tool for developing intercultural competence

People can have multi-layered identities such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, culture, etc. The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlie Crenshaw (Lucke 2018), which questions the identity formation based on one category alone (e.g., using nation alone) and makes use of multiple categories. For instance, Yuki is working at the university where the official language is English, but Swedish is used in everyday life. She is reluctant in initiating ideas without being asked or in arguing for her suggestions or asking too many questions. Other employees, not necessarily the ones with something relevant to share, tend to dominate. How would a PI understand and handle it? Some might conclude that this behavior is typical of Asian culture, others might assume that it has to do with gender. However, some might also realize the challenges of working in an English-Swedish environment. So, with the help of intersectionality, one can understand the behavior in the intersection of nationality, gender, and language skills.

Reflection on multicultural groups at Linköping University

I joined Linköping University (LIU) as a student in 2002 and since then I have remained here in different capacities: from master’s student to PhD student to postdoc and to research engineer. I also spent 2 years in the USA as a postdoc.

In the past 20 years, a steadily increasing number of international students and researchers have seminally benefited from the educational infrastructure of LIU. Hearing multiple foreign languages in the university corridors is now quite common—this is arguably an indication of the heightened attractiveness of LIU.

Having learnt the Swedish language with great interest during my first few years in Sweden, I have had the opportunity to understand the cultural nuances of the Swedish system. My journey through Swedish culture has been facilitated by my Swedish mentors and colleagues. Coming from India, living in Sweden, and having lived for a few years in the USA, I consider myself to be a multicultural person. I can empathize with experiences of people from different cultural backgrounds. Since 2007, I have been engaged in teaching activities, several of which involved international students. During my informal interactions with the international students over the years, I have often reflected upon the challenges they face and our (Faculty’s) skillset for anticipating and effectively handling these cultural challenges. Being aware of these challenges gives us a better opportunity to handle them. Here’s my list of the top three challenges faced by the students and my recommendations on how these challenges can be overcome:

**Language barrier**: Even though the lab meetings take place in English, several important issues might be informally discussed in Swedish, resulting in some of the members feeling excluded. The informal language in the coffee rooms is Swedish (which is quite natural), but some students, due to the language barrier, might not feel welcome to join these informal gatherings. This hinders them from becoming integrated within the groups, and results in loneliness. Since English is a second
language for the team members, there are chances of communication gap. If there is a communication gap, there is potential for conflicts and misunderstandings. Making conscious efforts to include the students in formal as well as informal gatherings will help them integrate with the group. Some team building activities (like icebreakers or afterwork) can also help build rapport between the team members.

**Cultural differences in dealing with hierarchy:** In some cultures, openly disagreeing with the supervisor is considered a sign of disrespect (Zheng 2019). However, the silence of the student can be misinterpreted by the supervisors. While in Asian cultures, silence can be interpreted as agreeing, in western cultures silence is considered as a lack of competency or critical thinking. This can be overcome by both sides understanding their cultural differences and supervisors trying to provide a safe environment for the student to voice their concerns.

**Stereotypical categorization:** Thinking in terms of categories is an oversimplification of reality and might lead to stereotyping and drawing false conclusions about an individual. Stereotypes can be described as “a widely held, generalized and simplified conception or image of a specific group of people”. For instance, it would be a case of stereotyping to assert that all US Americans are individualistic, all Asians lack critical thinking, and all Dutch lack a sense of humour. Stereotyping is a major barrier to intercultural communication (Barna 1994). It has the potential to create a “us versus them” kind of divide which can prove hard to bridge. Using an inclusive language, putting emphasis on how people connect and seeing common links (rather than focusing on the differences) can be conducive for making the students feel comfortable and welcome.

As put together by Nancy Van Note Chism (2002): (1) All students need to feel welcome (2) They need to feel that they are being treated as individuals (3) They need to feel that they can participate fully and (4) they need to be treated fairly.

In the settings of PBL or laboratory work in culturally diverse groups, it would be helpful to have cross cultural orientation for the tutors (through intercultural competence workshops), so that they actively create an open atmosphere for discussion and cooperation between the students. For instance, starting with an icebreaker when the students meet each other for the first time can be helpful for the students. When they get to know each other, they can transform into an efficient team. Some examples of icebreakers to start discussions within groups could be ‘what are your hobbies? what do you do when you meet your family?’ In my experience, certain foreign students, even those who are well versed in theoretical knowledge, struggle a lot in communication, either due to language barrier or because the study system is different from what they are used to from their home countries. The same students later perform very well, once they have understood how things work in Sweden. It is important that the tutor should not overestimate or underestimate the knowledge and intelligence of the students. By listening to the students and encouraging them to participate in the educational activities, the tutor can make an objective contribution to life of his or her students.

To summarize, the challenges arising from intercultural differences in a cross-cultural team can successfully be overcome by applying intersectionality and intercultural competence and developing a reflective supervision style.
To achieve intercultural competence at the university:

- Courses and workshops in intercultural competence for the staff (teaching as well as non-teaching) could be arranged (like the mandatory PBL course for the tutors)
- Short courses and workshops for domestic students
- Providing insights, through short courses, into the visible and invisible aspects of Swedish culture to the incoming students. Teaching them the value of intercultural competence
- Discussion within the research groups about the importance of intercultural competence for effective teamwork

Concluding remarks

We are living in a world in transition and to quote Charles Darwin ‘it is not the strongest of species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change’. Awareness of cross-cultural dynamics can lead to improvement in teaching methods which in turn will help the students in achieving their academic goals. The teams have to be culturally aware and culturally sensitive—such attributes are necessary for improving their performance.

The thoughts that I have expressed in this paper are based on my own experiences during the interactions that I have had with students from different cultures over the years. A lot of cited research comes from publications in business and management studies where extensive studies on intercultural competence have been conducted.
References


