

## Understanding Diversity and Equality: Managing Professional Etiquette across Teams

By Saiqa Anne Qureshi and Jaime Petrasek

A diverse team can provide huge strengths and benefits to an organization, with much evidence that it can increase productivity, creativity, employee engagement, reputation, and support recruitment efforts. However, balancing norms of working styles across teams and professional etiquette can pose a challenge when working in diverse teams. If not properly managed, strengths cannot be harnessed and miscommunication can hamper productivity as well as stifle collaboration efforts (Inside 6Q blog, 2020).

### Challenges

Colleagues from different cultures can bring with them different workplace attitudes, values, behaviors, and etiquette. While these characteristics can be enriching and beneficial, they can also cause misunderstandings between team members. These can be reflected in things such as: formality, organizational hierarchy, and working hours, all of which can differ across cultures. Even in an office where everyone speaks the same language, comprehending a range of accents, or understanding a native-speaker's use of idioms, can be difficult. Non-verbal communication is a nuanced part of cultural interaction that can lead to misunderstandings between team members. Things such as comfortable levels of physical space, making or maintaining eye contact, and gesturing can all oscillate widely (Reynolds, 2019 and Fragapane, 2018).

### Approaches

Day-to-day there are ways to support a culturally diverse team, to avoid conflict that may arise from cultural differences, to manage them should they arise, and to move towards leveraging cultural diversity. The below framework supports individual contributors and managers to build a team and facilitate relationship building with colleagues (Henman, 2016; Thomas & Ely, 1996; and Koehl, 2016).

- 1. Acknowledge and Respect Cultural Differences:** Address the existence of diverse cultural backgrounds within a team and that it is necessary to navigate those to have a high performing team. By acknowledging that the differences exist, you allow staff members to more openly discuss how they communicate, what their social norms might be, and facilitate a more open environment that encourages team members to assume best intent in all communication.
- 2. Establish Norms for the Team:** On teams and within organizations, it is important to set norms that will ease and facilitate collaboration. Great success can be seen by setting standards that address simple everyday operations, such as timelines of email replies, frequency of team meetings, and structure of reporting. Norms create a more uniform experience both internally for your team but also with external collaborators, teams and stakeholders. Norms also allow a team to set their own culture in terms of how they communicate and can support communication between team members.

- 3. Develop a Team Identity and Outline Roles and Responsibilities:**

At the highest level it is important to identify overarching goals, breaking them down first by team and then to individual contributors. This supports the creation of a shared vision and conveys both the specific importance and value of each team member's contribution. These goals should be communicated to the team as a whole collectively, and then to individuals in their one-on-one meetings with managers as part of those meetings and check-ins.

- 4. Over-Communicate:**

Communicate key messages in a range of formats including electronic and in person, whenever possible. Word choice is pivotal in this process, tailoring messages to those with a range of language skills, and asking staff to rephrase and repeat back key messages to ensure comprehension.

- 5. Build Rapport and Trust:**

In addition to the first four steps, learning about team members outside of work can help to build trust. It supports team cohesion, as team members are more likely to ask colleagues questions, and supports peer-to-peer learning. Peer-to-peer learning requires a safe space for employees to ask questions, experiment, and make mistakes, but is a highly effective way to learn. A team that trusts one another creates that safe space to make mistakes and further learning.

### Rebuilding Communication and Trust

When miscommunication has occurred and trust has broken down it is important to support the rebuilding of that trust. Teams can stop communicating and become disengaged. Long term this can lead to turnover of staff members (Molinsky & Gundling, 2016; OnPoint Consulting, 2019; and Palmer & Blake, 2018).

- 1. Acknowledge the Issue:** It is key to acknowledge that communication and trust have broken down, as without that it is impossible to restore either. In order to secure future buy in and influence colleagues, everyone involved in the breakdown must acknowledge their part in it.
- 2. Get Feedback and Varying Perspectives:** It is important to gather data (survey, possibly anonymous, or directed conversations) to better understand how breakdown occurred. In many cases team members have very different explanations and perspectives about what happened. The act of simply asking team members what they think happened and giving them the space to communicate their opinions and feelings, in and of itself is an important step in re-establishing trust and re-opening the lines of communication.
- 3. Make Specific Changes:** There must be an appreciable change in practice that is part of a plan with clear steps that will impact the way a team will work moving forward. There must be a commitment to transparent communication as part of rebuilding a team with consequences for not complying with newly agreed norms.

4. **Communicate Clearly and Consistently:** Poor communication is one of the primary contributing factors in the breakdown of trust in a team. The lack of clear, consistent communication can lead to employees not feeling valued and supported. Employees may not understand expectations, overall goals, or their contribution to larger overarching goals and why they are important in achieving those goals, which can be especially problematic when they are held accountable for outcomes they may not understand.
5. **Promote Accountability:** Inconsistent accountability, combined with poor communication can break down trust in a team. Consistent standards and norms, specifically in terms of communication can provide an opportunity to build trust over time.

Fundamental to building an effective team and working with colleagues is communication, rapport building, and trust. Particularly in diverse teams, it is important to acknowledge cultural differences and norms, develop team standards, and communicate using a variety of methods. Diverse teams are increasingly the norm and can have huge advantages; however, balancing a range of working styles across teams and differing standards of professional etiquette can pose challenges. Yet, there are strategies to rebuild trust and communication, should they break down. ■

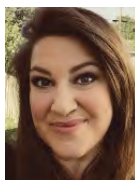
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