# Multicultural teaming at work

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**Today's teams operate across boundaries of culture, generation and lifestyle – and this can lead to conflict. Tania Coke reveals how to overcome differences in a multicultural working environment.**



The mono-cultural team is a thing of the past. In Britain today, it's hard to find any team that does not operate across boundaries of ethnicity, generation and lifestyle.

This can make for a hugely enriching experience. However, it can also lead to a large dose of frustration and workplace conflict.

As our places of work become ever more diverse, it's worth reflecting on what we can do to minimise the pain and maximise the joy of working in multicultural teams.

As a Brit living in Japan, I have plenty of opportunities to reflect on this. When I moved here nine years ago, I thought I knew a thing or two about dealing with difference.

After all, I was a qualified workplace mediator, trained in a range of conflict management styles and a healthy portfolio of cross-cultural mediations under my belt. I underestimated the size of the cultural gap I was facing.

**Awkward silences**

Here's one example. I found that in Japan, when I posed a question to a room full of people, I was typically met with an awkward silence. No one was willing to speak out in front of the whole group, to respond to my question.

It unnerved me, and I held it against them. "Doesn't anyone have an opinion?" I thought to myself.

I didn't yet realise that in Japan it can be seen as presumptuous – even arrogant – to voice an opinion in front of a group of people, especially if those people are strangers.

Another cultural shock was the Japanese reluctance to say no. I remember once asking a shop assistant if she sold a certain product. By way of response, she inclined her head and said: "Well, hmmm, err."

I was irritated by her lack of clarity and the inconvenience it caused me. Why couldn't she just say no? It took me years to acknowledge her answer as a different – but equally valid – style of communication to my own.

In her culture, a negative answer is considered rude and should be inferred by the listener from the manner of the response.

These little differences have big potential to erode teamwork and cause workplace conflict.

Here in Japan, there's a risk of teams splitting down the cultural divide, with the Japanese feeling aggressed by the indiscretion of their non-Japanese counterparts, who in turn feel alienated by the apparent vagueness of the Japanese.

I still get caught out on occasion, judging people unfavourably when they behave in ways that clash with my values and expectations. So I've been collecting ideas to remove my cultural blinkers.

**Replace judgment with curiosity**

One approach is to train myself to replace judgment with curiosity. To do this, I first need to notice the differences that are triggering me and acknowledge the effect they are having on me.

For instance, I need to recognise if I am getting irritated by the lack of a clear answer and acknowledge if I am judging someone negatively as a result.

Having done this, I can ask myself why I am feeling or thinking these things. Am I irritated because I assume a decision can only be made once everyone has expressed an unambiguous opinion?

Am I judging someone unfavourably because they are frustrating my desire to get the decision made? What is it about my personal or cultural history that explains my reaction?

I can also investigate why the other person is behaving in this unfamiliar way. I could do this using my own imagination to guess the reasons. Or I could ask questions to find out.

It might be helpful to address the issue as it arises. Or it may be better to wait until later to ask them, or to ask someone else – perhaps someone with more experience of cross-cultural communication.

By activating my curiosity, instead of succumbing to judgment, I can gain better understanding of the reasons – both personal and cultural – behind previously alien behaviours.

This in itself is fascinating because it helps me to see the limitations of my own thinking. It is also rewarding. I am rewarded by better relationships at a personal and team level. It also gives me information I can use to overcome the difficulties and adapt to the differences.

For instance, a better understanding of Japanese group dynamics can lead to the idea of holding small group discussions before asking people to voice their opinions in front of a larger group.

**Team coaching**

The benefits of this curiosity-led approach can be multiplied if the whole team is involved. One way to do this is through team coaching. I've had some eye-opening and moving experiences of this.

In some cases, it took the form of facilitated conversations: a professional coach invited team members to name the behaviours that were frustrating or confusing them, enquire into the reasons for those behaviours, and brainstorm ways to get around them.

On other occasions, it involved more personal sharing, in which team members opened up to one another about their private dreams and challenges.

This can be done through straightforward conversation, or through exercises designed to help people know one another at a far deeper level than everyday work typically allows.

The above are just a few of the ways which have helped me to minimise the frustration and multiply the delight of working in multi-cultural teams.

There are countless other possibilities open to anyone with enough awareness and curiosity.