

Three methods for utilizing multicultural differences

Working in multicultural teams brings with it particular challenges - but at the same time also a wide range of opportunities. There are various approaches to making productive use of these. One of these is to leave the team or project management to specialized experts. If such specialists are not available, various methods can be used to consciously incorporate cultural differences and use them as a resource.

1) Three-step method: solution approach for critical incidents

The following three-step problem-solving process has proven to be particularly useful for transcultural teams where differences have led to conflict or frustration. The model is designed to help participants recognize that there are different realities and perspectives. They should then try to find their common ground. The basic assumption of the model is that it is advantageous to develop and examine several options for action.

Step 1: Describe and comment on the problem from both (all) perspectives

What are the underlying assumptions of the group members? What are the different perspectives of the group members?

Step 2: Look for a common denominator

Where do the mutual interests overlap?

In order to find out what the common ground is, it is necessary to determine to what extent the situation is interpreted differently. Assumptions must be questioned. (If there is no overlap and no common ground among the participants, it will be difficult to solve the problem). The common ground may or may not relate to the work, it is in any case specific to a particular group in a particular context. Finding a common goal means that the group can move to the next step.

Step 3: Finding a mutually satisfactory solution

What adjustments is each group member prepared to make in order to find a satisfactory alternative?

In this step, as many options for action as possible should be developed. Depending on the problem or point of view, some ideas will be easier to implement than others. If numerous alternatives are developed and assessed through the lens of cultural sensitivity, the chance of a real solution to the problem increases.

(This method is adapted from Gardenswartz 2003, p. 307.)

2) Method for reconciling conflicting values

The method for "reconciling" opposing values is more complex than the three-step method and is suitable for dilemmas that arise when clearly different positions are opposed. Charles Hampden-Turner writes in his book "Building Cross-Cultural Competence" (p. 349): "Every country, every organization, every person faces certain universal problems or dilemmas. A culture is expressed in the way people approach these dilemmas. Intercultural competence is achieved by recognizing cultural differences, respecting them and ultimately reconciling with

them." In the reconciliation phase, companies or individuals not only learn how to live with these differences, but they actively apply them for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of their partners.

The dilemmas that need to be resolved are subsequently assigned to the cultural dimensions described in section 4.2.2.

Hampden-Turner lists five further reasons for solving the dilemmas:

- Collaboration between people with different values makes an organization stronger.
- Unresolved conflicts reduce the energy of groups and individuals.
- Reconciling different values leads to better products and services.
- Reconciling different values is an ongoing task.
- By increasing cultural competence through the reconciliation of differences, conflicting values can be transformed into complementary values.

The following method is derived from Hampden-Turner's method of reconciliation.
(Hampden-Turner 2000, p. 350 ff.)

Step 1: Identify the dilemma

Clarify the opposing positions through interviews, drawings, data analysis, storytelling.

Step 2: Draw the dilemma in a diagram

- a) Name the axes according to the opposing positions, for example: One must tell the truth vs. one must help a friend.
- b) Connect the opposing statements with the corresponding dimensions of the Hampden-Turner model, e.g. universalism vs. particularism.

Step 3: Expand the dilemma

Create a list of positives and negatives for each position.

Examples:

positive: no expectations; you know where you stand; truth is truth, etc.

negative: the friend has to pay for it; end of friendship; deceiving a friend is painful, etc.

positive: friendship is stronger; friend can count on me; I am proud to help a friend, etc.

negative: laws are bent; this person cannot be trusted; corruption and nepotism, etc.

Step 4: Reconcile the dilemma

Formulate activities / sort them (first A, then B) / create the context (draw a picture with a frame) / intertwine, weave into each other (feedback round) / use synergies (A through B and vice versa)

Step 5: Create a plan of action

What needs to be done to achieve reconciliation? Define the action steps and plan their implementation.

3) Intervision method

The third method of using the differences is the intervision method. If a case is diffuse and various reasons can trigger misunderstandings and irritations, this method from psychology can help to clarify the facts and initiate a solution process. Ideally, this requires a group of 5 to 25 people.

(This method is adapted from Eric Lippmann: "Intervision. Designing collegial coaching professionally", 2004).

Step 1: Presentation of the case, preferably by the person directly involved

The participants ask the person concerned questions for clarification (no advice in this step!)

Step 2: Collecting hypotheses and ideas for possible solutions

For about ten minutes, the participants write down as many hypotheses and possible solutions as they can on various flipcharts provided. Make sure that they do not talk to each other during this phase so that the thinking process is not interrupted and as many people as possible think and write along.

Step 3: Evaluate hypotheses and possible solutions

All hypotheses and proposed solutions are assessed, commented on and rated on a scale from double plus to double minus. The participants clarify if the speaker misunderstands their thoughts. The person concerned presents possible next steps.

This method makes it easier to think in variants. It makes it possible to see several reasons and assess them. This broadens their perspective. Several possible solutions are also available for discussion. This opens up options for further action.