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Editorial

In the past, when sales and marketing initiatives were largely aimed at national markets, it made eminently good sense for companies to bolster their ranks with skilled personnel from their home country. In today's stiff competitive environment where all eyes are firmly trained on global markets, more and more organizations are counting on culturally diverse teams to respond to the varying needs of an international customer base and thereby gain a competitive advantage.

When a multicultural group of people are working well together, their ability to make great decisions outshines that of a team from a single culture. The obverse, however, is true when team members from different cultural backgrounds have difficulty communicating and trusting each other or simply can't get along.

Cultural diversity is an asset to an organization, and as with other forms of assets, it should be managed carefully. That's where the leaders of multicultural teams come into the picture. They are the ones who need to create an environment where team members can reconcile their differences, communicate openly, learn to trust each other and therefore bring added value to their company.

The crucial matter of building trust within international teams (and any team for that matter) is what Anne Niesen is talking to us about in this month's issue of your newsletter. By the way, it is not that easy, she says.

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Leading Multicultural Teams

By Anne Niesen, Senior consultant based in Hamburg

The brilliant lone warrior has become a rare figure in today's world. Outstanding results in the shortest possible time cannot be achieved without extensive networking. Matrix organisations reflect this reality. The high level of networking calls for all employees to be able to communicate, negotiate and act across cultural boundaries.

Everyone knows the situation: differences in viewpoints, preferences and working methods among colleagues lead to friction and loss of time and energy. Instead of mutually complementing and encouraging each other—as was intended—people may begin, perhaps even subconsciously, to throw up barriers and form opposing camps: *"What does Controlling/Marketing/xyz want now".* This diverts attention and efforts away from the true objective, the generation of excellent ideas and solutions.

Leaders of global multicultural teams are in the most complex of situations. In addition to diverging interests, they have to achieve results in a virtual environment and manage conflicting loyalties which are heightened by a culturally diverse workforce.

Their challenges are in most cases highly underestimated. They are experienced (project) managers, so what is the issue?

Research and experience point to the same conclusion. In matrix organizations, when it is often not possible to control and exert authority anymore, the only way to assure excellent results is by creating a high level of trust.

Trust is the key-factor in building effective multi-national teams.
If you are an expert in what you are doing on a technical content-level and can't manage to create an environment of trust in your team, you will not be able to reach outstanding results. With trust, you can gain "moral control". Creativity,

information sharing, loyalty, motivation– these are all only possible on a firm basis of trust. Consider: What does it feel like to work in situations and teams where there is a high level of trust in comparison to a situation with a low-level of trust?

It will not come as a surprise that the more diverse your team becomes, the more difficult it will be to create this culture of trust. How come? It has been proven that people quickly trust others that somehow belong to their own circle, that are somehow similar to them. And in a diverse team, similarity is less frequently encountered.

So what does this all mean when you are leading a multicultural team?

People build trust on the basis of certain perceptions of when and why others are to be trusted: Do they feel team members are competent? Do they feel people behave with integrity and are reliable? Are they interested in others? Are they open with information and do they share freely?

As a leader of a multicultural team, you need to realize that the perceptions and ideas of what makes people competent, reliable and how much information is needed varies greatly. For example, is competency mainly proven by expert knowledge or is it linked to people skills? Will I be seen as reliable when I deliver exactly on time or when I think of additional solutions?

What people need to build up trust might be influenced by past experience, loyalty, cultural background, professional background and a myriad of other factors. The only way to find out is by constantly communicating, negotiating and finding out together which way works best. And to do so in or out of the usual work environment.

You think that would take time that you do not have? While it's true that building trust requires time and effort, it's equally true that there is no shortcut. Only when you and your team find the time and make the effort will you become an excellent team that reaches outstanding results.

Mini bio of Anne Niesen

Anne has been working successfully as a management consultant, coach and trainer since 1999. She specializes in developing and coaching executives and teams. She provides professional support for companies and individuals seeking to build successful partnerships and effective cooperation.

Languages: German, English and Japanese

Cultural Tips

Building trust in multicultural teams

1. Ask team members to share what the word "trust" means to them.
2. Find out what the deal breakers are for each person on the team.
3. As the Chinese say, show that you have a good heart, not only a business mind.