

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON WORK TEAMS

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Abstract: Increasing competition and globalization are amplifying the interest for work teams analysed within a transcultural context. Cultural diversity exercises a certain influence on the organization and behavioural patterns of members belonging to work teams. The present study aims to present, comparatively, the stage of researches done on the influence of culture on work teams and some future research directions.

Keywords: culture, team, work, globalization

Introduction

The amplification of the competition between organizations, doubled by the more pronounced business globalization have determined their focalization on training/creating and developing work teams, which working together, to contribute to increase the performance. Thus, we assist to an increase of the dependence of the organizations on the virtual and transnational teams. The members of these teams may have different nationalities or cultural values, adopting some decisions regarding the complex work performed by them. With all these cultural or nationality differences, the small number of research that approached the efficiency of the teams led outside the north-American or Western context surprises (Kirkman et.al., 2016, p.137).

The working teams represent essential characteristics of any organization, the individuals working in very few situations separate from each other. Schermerhorn and his collaborators define the team as "a group of people gathered in order to use their complementary skills to meet a common purpose for which they respond collectively". There is a trend in the specialized literature dedicated to the subject for using the terms "group" and "team" interchangeable, not being easy to distinguish between these two categories. In most papers, the term "group" is used in a general way, meanwhile the term "team" is used in a specific context.

Robbins and Judge (2013, p.309) make an interesting comparison between groups and teams based upon more criteria.

Chart 1. Differences between groups and teams

The tracked feature	Team	Group
Goal	Collective performance	Sharing information
Synergy	Positive	Neutral
Responsibility	Individual and mutual	Individual
Skills	Complementary	Random and varied

1. Problems and research themes regarding the influence of culture upon team works

Aycan and Gelfand (2012, p.1128) show a few research queries ought to be taken into consideration when studying the impact of culture on work teams:

- (a) How do the individuals react to the situations involved by the team work and how does this aspect modify from one culture to another?
- (b) Does the organization of teams and fulfilling the work tasks occur in the same way in different cultures?
- (c) How does the cultural diversity from the inside of the team and its outcome influence?

In a critical review done by Zhou and Shi (2011, p.6), 85 representative studies have been analyzed, regarding the role of the culture in teams and groups, priority being given to the (a) identification of the conceptual and analytical treatment of culture in the group research context; (b) assessing the role of culture in explaining the processes and groups' performance; (c) giving further recommendations related to this research issue. The research theme and the type of studies in which they fit are presented in chart 2

Chart 2. The research theme on groups/work teams and the type of study in which they fit

Theme of research	Type I	Type II	Type III	Total
Attitude	9	3	3	15
Group's efficiency	3	3	1	7
Group's cohesion	5	2	1	8
Social influence	6	5	1	12
Conflict	4	2	3	9
Cooperation	6	2	4	12
Leadership	5	0	1	6
The match between person and group's culture	2	0	0	2
Equity or allocation of rewards	4	1	0	5
Training and learning	5	0	1	6
Innovation	4	0	0	4
Decision making	3	1	1	5
Performance	2	9	1	12
	5			5

Type I studies: the cultural approach as independent variable; Type II studies: culture as moderator; Type III studies: culture as independent variable and mediator also

Source: Zhou and Shi (2011,p.14)

According to Kirkman et. Al. (2016, p. 137-138), there are two main approaches for including the national culture when examining the way in which the team component influences its efficiency. The first one is almost exclusively based on using the research instruments through surveys for measuring the average levels of the cultural values held individually. These average levels of the cultural values can be linked either to the dynamic of the team directly or mediated throughout intervention variables or as mediator. Thus, Kirkman and Shapiro (2001) have discovered that the positive effect of the team collectivism on cooperating within the team is mediated by the resistance degree of its members to perform collective tasks in the detriment of the

individual ones. Plus, the average level of the collectivism consolidates the trend that a higher efficiency to be associated with a higher performance of the team (Gibson, 1999).

The second approach is based on two methods that assess the diversity of the team's cultural values. While the first method uses a measure of the variance of the origin nation (diversity of nationalities), the latter resorts to a measure of a variance of real cultural values (diversity of cultural values).

The individuals from different cultures see the groups and teams in a different way, different perceptions prevailing on what "teamwork" means. Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) have discovered that employees interpret the concept of teamwork with the help of certain metaphors, used when they discuss about teams. If the national culture is marked by individualism, metaphors related to sport are likely to be used, where the roles are explicitly defined, there are few expectations for hierarchy and the quality of the member in team appears voluntarily. In case in which the organization puts accent on a very strict control, military or family metaphors are likely to be used, where there are high expectations regarding the clarity of goal and performance indicators. Thus, we ascertain that the definition of teamwork is different from one culture to another, this aspect having implications on the modality of team's coordination and evaluation.

Some research has been dedicated to the link between the cultural values and the resilience to teamwork. Kirkman, Shapiro and their collaborators have been demonstrated that the individualism is associated with a general resilience to teams and reduced support for rewards based on teams' results (Kirkman și Shapiro, 1997, 2000, 2001). The authors have identified cultural values linked to the resilience to other aspects of teamwork, especially for self-managed teams (high gap of power, orientation towards being and the determinism are linked to the resilience to teams' self-management). Also, team level of collectivism and the orientation towards "to do" have been associated to a reduced resilience to teams and self-management, which has led to the increase of team efficiency.

If we refer to the affective behavior of the team's members, Ilies et al. (2007) have discovered that its members, who are more collectivists, are more susceptible to the affective influences of other members, than to those individualists.

The individualism and collectivism are associated with the group's efficiency also. Edy and Dobbins (1997) have discovered that self-efficiency of members in relation to teamwork has been related to the self-reported collectivism. Hardin et.al. (2007) have reached to the conclusion that the members of teams with individualist cultures have reported higher believes regarding the self-efficiency rather than the members with collectivism cultures. Research show that the feedback related to a person's previous performance is an important determinant of the self-efficiency and of the future performance of work (Zhou și Shi, 2011, p.16).

The culture moderates the relationship between the group's cohesion, on one hand and its processes and results on the other. Man and Lam (2003) have tested the mediator effect of the individualism/collectivism upon the relationship between the job's characteristics (complexity and autonomy/self-sufficiency) and cohesion, the sample being comprised by 381 teams of Hong Kong and USA subsidiaries of an international bank. It has been discovered that the positive effect of the complexity and autonomy of the job upon the group's cohesion has been more prominent in the individualist groups than in the collectivist ones. Watson et. al. (2008) has shown that the American teams had a behavior more oriented to the team and more cohesion, while the Mexican ones to more self-oriented behavior and more conflict.

The culture influences the behavior processes within the teams, especially cooperation (Aycaň și Gelfand, 2012, p.1129). Eby și Dobbins (1997) have found that teams with a higher percentage of collectivism were developing higher levels of cooperation which further on

determined a higher performance. Chen and Li (2005) have remarked that the Chinese adopt less cooperative decisions than the Australians in business situations in which no penalty system was applied (formal or informal). Probst et. al.(1999) have assessed the cultural characteristics of the individuals and then they put them in relation with the cooperating behavior in social dilemmas. The results have indicated an interaction between the cultural characteristics and the type of dilemma which required cooperation. It needs to be mentioned that there are situation factors which may/can influence the cooperation within groups of different cultures. Thus, Chen and Meidl (1998) have found that instrumental factors such as high inter-dependence of objectives, improvement of personal identity and cognitive trust accelerates cooperation in the individualist cultures, while in the collective ones, the socio-emotional factors such as sharing the objectives, improvement of the group's identity and affective trust improve cooperation in collectivist cultures (Gelfand, Erez și Aycan, 2007, p.491).

As far as the relationship between culture and equity is concerned, respectively the resource allocation, the theoretical basis of studies from this category is provided by the distributive equity. The individualism, respectively the collectivism from a certain culture determines different styles of reward allocation with the group members and outside of it (Zhou și Shi,2011,p.20). Kim et. al.(1990) have shown that the groups from US and Japan, very individualist and masculine one, have manifested a preference for equity than the South-Korean group, culture which is neither individualist nor masculine. In the Pillutla et. al.(2007) study, about the effects of the Chinese traditional values, the perception of the group members regarding the cohesion in group, was influencing their tendency to equally allocate and carry out, egocentric self-allocations to group members.

As far as the relationship between culture and innovation is concerned, in the context of teams work, McLeod et.al. (1996) have found that the ideas produced by groups with different ethnicities, were of higher quality, more efficient and applicable than the ones issued by the homogeneous groups. Literature indicates also studies that have surveyed the relationship between certain cultural values and innovation. The current research in the organizational behavior suggests that the organizations should adopt collectivism values, because these promote more cooperation and productivity, while the individualist ones would incite to destructive conflict and opportunism (Zhou și Shi,2011,p.22).

2. The role of the multicultural teams

At national and global level also, the multicultural man power has become a reality. The multiculturalism impact is different dependent on the competitive environment and the company's general strategy. According to Marquardt and Horvath (2001), the multicultural teams are task-oriented groups and that are made up of persons of different cultural backgrounds. The multicultural teams can be classified in one of the next categories (Adler, 2002, p.139-140:

- "token" teams which have a sole member from other culture, that can adopt situations differently than the other colleagues;
- Bi-cultural teams, in which two or more members represent one of the two cultures; these have to admit and integrate continuously the perspectives of both cultures.
- Multicultural teams, in which members represent 3 or more ethnical backgrounds

The advantages and disadvantages of the diversity within multicultural teams are presented in the chart no. 3

Chart 3. Diversity in multicultural teams: advantages and disadvantages

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
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The diversity allows a higher creativity: more perspectives, more and better ideas, less group thinking	The diversity causes lack of cohesion: mistrust, lack of communication, stress
The diversity determines higher focus on understanding ideas, perspectives, meanings and arguments of other persons	The lack of cohesion causes the inability to validate ideas and people in order to reach to an agreement when needed, to obtain consensus decision, to take concerted actions
Increased creativity can lead to generating a better understanding of defining certain problem, to more alternatives, solutions and better decisions	The teams can become less useful, less efficient, less productive
Teams can become more efficient and more productive	

Source: slightly modified after **Adler, N.**- *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*, fourth edition, South Western, 2002, p.143

Timizi (2008, p.35-37) appreciates that literature does not give a clear support regarding the cultural dimensions that can be relevant for understanding the multicultural teams. In his conception, the relevant cultural dimensions are synthesized in chart 4.

Chart 4. Cultural dimensions with relevance to understanding multicultural teams

Cultural dimension	Relevance
Individualism-Collectivism	The individualist cultures are oriented to individualist preferences, while the collective ones are oriented to collective needs
Universalism-Particularism	Useful dimension in comprehending the dynamic of the teams, especially in conflict solving, problem solving, decision making
Specific-diffuse	Dimension related to communication, conflict and leadership dynamic, in multicultural teams
Neutral-Affective	Dimensions with clear implications on the organizational behavior and teamwork, especially in the communication area and conflict solving
Accomplishment- attribution	Applications in the way in which multicultural teams define efficiency and dynamic of leadership
Temporality	Implications in performing the team's tasks, different perceptions of timing can complicate the dynamic of the team
Genre egalitarianism	Implications in the external and internal dynamic of the team
Intellectual autonomy	Implications on the quality of problem solving and decision making

Source: reworked by author from **Tirmizi, S.A.**- *The Impact of Culture in Multicultural Teams*, în **Halverson. C.B., Tirmizi, S.A.**-*Effective Multicultural Teams. Theory and Practice*, Springer, 2008

Multicultural teams can produce important strategic advantages for organizations (Earley și Gibson, 2002). The cultural differences, combined with other characteristics of the work groups,

can produce some negative effects upon these. Many studies have shown that multicultural teams can experiment a high level of conflict, ethnocentrism and problems within the group (Gelfand, Erez și Aycan, 2007, p.491). The multicultural teams can obtain better performances than the homogeneous ones if leaders give them direct advice and prevent communication problems.

3. Conclusions and further research perspectives

Research of culture influence on groups and working teams is in progress, thus contributing to enlarging the theoretical and conceptual horizon of the domain. The applicability of the American and Western theories related to the influence of culture on teams can be questioned in other cultural contexts. Individuals from Western cultures tend to approach the work in team in ways that correspond to individualism values and to reduced power gap, they have the tendency to perceive it in metaphors consistent with their cultural practices (sport), being less cooperative and less subjects of social influence (Aycan și Gelfand, 2012, p.1130).

Zhou and Shi ((2011,p.27-29) propose 3 further research directions in the field. The first one suggests the enlargement in the research use of other cultural values too, not only the individualism/collectivism, in correlation with the specific of the analyzed cultures. The second direction regards the research method, suggesting the use of constructs that have the same meaning in all cultures investigated. The third research direction regards passing/shifting from one isolated and static approach of the work groups to a dynamic one.

Other perspectives with research potential are the comparisons between the performances of the multicultural teams against to the homogeneous teams, as well as the development and function of the virtual teams with members of different cultural contexts. An aspect of interest could be the research of leaders' role and behavior that animate the activity in the multicultural virtual teams.

The development of the intercultural skills can facilitate collaboration within the multicultural teams, whether this is of intra or inter organizational type.

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