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International Team Building – A British Perspective

By Dr. Sonja Bründl-Price

In times of increasing globalization international teams are commonplace phenomena and beset with every possible facet of success and failure. People from different cultural background strive to understand each other, to overcome intercultural obstacles and optimize group potential. The question often posed concerns the success rate of international teams in comparison to monocultural groups, but this soon becomes irrelevant as such teams are now part and package of economic growth, forming for such diverse reasons as mergers and acquisitions, international holding companies, transfer of know-how and so on. That is not to say, however, that international teamwork cannot be exceptionately productive and efficient *if* due care and attention are paid to the more intricate nature of group interaction. The synergies created by working together can more than compensate for any initial slowdown.

The degree of homogeneity in any group is often directly linked to the speed of completing any task. This can refer to many characteristics of the group structure, be it expertise, age, sex, or personal background.[i] Culture is simply an additional aspect of group dynamics with, admittedly, widespread consequences, requiring an increased need for special skills and strategies to avoid possible setbacks. International teams do, however, possess the unique opportunity of growing and developing synergies through their very diversity.

The Choice of Language

The most likely situation is the use of a common language within the group. Whatever the choice native speakers should be aware of their incredible advantage over all others, who have to struggle to varying degrees with the foreign language. Language disadvantage can be overcome with different strategies such as listening to the foreign language but responding in your mother tongue or even using an interpreter. The former presupposes a sound knowledge of all languages involved, which is unlikely if the group exceeds binational form but is a possible solution in one to one encounters. An interpreter would probably be too costly or impractical in the long term and here communication would be extremely dependent on the skills of the interpreter. Another possibility would be to chose a common foreign language for all participants, which is usually only ever the case if there is no native language understood. There is no optimal solution; only one which suits the group in question, but awareness of the power of language is vital.

Heightening Awareness

Awareness is the name of the game – it is indispensable in intercultural dealings - when two or more cultures interact with each other. Knowledge of the foreign culture(s) is a great supporting factor but is often limited when you consider the fact that many cultures may be involved. Above all awareness of our own cultural background is an indispensable ingredient of the necessary intercultural competence and a prerequisite to successful interaction.

We are all determined to more or lesser extents by our cultural backgrounds. This may become part of our unconscious as it is often unreflected and automatized. An example of this is religion. Many Europeans would not consider themselves to be very religious, in fact they may actively have renounced the Church, but Christianity still influences their lives. How many people would choose to work on Christmas Day or Good Friday? German and the British people live in societies organized around such Christian celebrations - even in the Ex-GDR, where religion was even disapproved of, such days were free. How likely is it that an email gets answered on these days but in many countries these are not holidays. Thus, what we accept as normality may be unimaginable or worse still unacceptable in other societies. People may be blind to their cultural background, and emphasize individualism as the guiding principle in teamwork, making the point that we are all individuals and as such must simply learn to work together with each other.

Whilst cultural determination is an important fact, it is not the whole story – we are of course all individuals *from different cultures*. The fact that we belong to a culture does not in any way negate our individualism. According to *J.Galtung* there are certain cultural trends and as the individual is part of his or her culture, these characteristics are inherent to a greater or lesser extent in the people of a certain culture.[ii]

STYLE	CENTRE	OUTSKIRTS	CHARACTERISTICS
SAXONIC	(A) USA (B) GB	CANADA AUSTRALIA	PRAGMATIC
NIPPONIC	JAPAN	EAST ASIA	HARMONIOUS
TEUTONIC	GERMANY	EASTERN EUROPE	THEORETIC
GALLIC	FRANCE	ITALY, FRANCOPH. AFRICA, ROMANIA	AESTHETIC

This theory is naturally controversial as it appears to categorize cultures and move dangerously near to stereotypical thinking, but Galtung was talking about trends and not static images. He felt, for instance, that Saxonic cultures like the British were more pragmatic and less theory-orientated that Teutonic cultures, to which the German belong. In my classes students are often prone to denying such inherent German qualities as a high regard for the written word. But when asked about ID cards and the obligation to register your home address with the authorities *(Einwohnemeldeamt)* in Germany, most felt this was necessary. They could not imagine how society functioned without these phenomena but the British have always vehemently resisted the introduction of any form of ID and never register except to vote. The British also do not have a written constitution and the legal system is based on precedence, with decisions made on experience, not on written guidelines. A British annual business report is on average approximately half as long as that of the German branch of the same company. From a British perspective there is too much paperwork in German business dealings but Germans probably do not feel the same.. Both are of course right, there is only as much emphasis on the written word and theory as necessary - as necessary for the culture in question. What may seem suitable and perfectly plausible in one culture will seem too much or too little from the perspective of another culture. If we were to look deeper into the emphasis on theory or pragmatism of the two cultures we would discover that the roots lie in the historical development of science in the 17th century, when the English took an empirical approach as opposed to Continental Rationalism, which continued to thrive in France and Germany

Perspective

Perspective is what counts and you must be aware of your perspective. Aspects of another culture only seem out of proportion to what you consider to be normal in relation to your own culture. It is precisely for this very reason that students of Intercultural Communication now attend classes on their own culture before getting to grips with foreign ones. I personally never became aware of my own cultural background until I moved abroad. Culture in the wider sense of the word means everything that is communicated to you in your native familiar surroundings. Things that no longer need to be reflected upon are all part of the culture you soak up through every aspect of communication, be it media, education, family, workplace etc. There is no need to reflect upon your own culture, if the people you interact with share the same values and cultural identity as you. Total plausibility can usually be solely found in your own culture and it is only in direct contact with foreign cultures is there any necessity to review those values.

This may only become clear after the first misunderstanding occurs, what at first glance may appear to be an obituary notice in Germany may just be a business card or a presentation announcement in the USA:

The McColl School of Business
Graduate Business Alumni Association
Presents...

Heidi Miller

Named the second most powerful woman in American business by FORTUNE Magazine in 1999, Ms. Miller has served as Senior Executive Vice President and CFO of priceline.com and Executive Vice President and CFO of Citigroup Inc. Currently, she is serving as Vice Chairman of Marsh, Inc.

THURSDAY, APRIL 12, 2001
6:00 P.M.
ACCENTURE AUDITORIUM
JOHN H. SYKES LEARNING CENTER

Tickets: $12 General Public, $10 Alumni
For more information, contact: Susan Cameron, Director of External Relations
Phone: 704-337-2256 Email: camerons@queens.edu

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The same may be true of obituary column in an American newspaper, which may look more like a dating column to the German reader, as it is almost unheard of to see smiling photos of the deceased in German obituaries.

Obituary Column

Mecklenburg

Mr. U. Chester (Chet) Wheichel, age 90, died March 16, 2001 in Wilmington, NC.

Born in Gaffney, SC, Mr. Wheichel moved to Charlotte at the age of two years and spent his entire life there. He started his career with the Pure Oil Company. He served the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce as Director of Industrial Development until he joined Celanese Corp. where he retired as Corporate Director of Community Relations.

Always interested and active in local community affairs he served as the first President and Co-Founder of the Charlotte Public Relations Society, was President and Man of the Year of the Charlotte Jaycees, Co-Founder and director of the 'Jaycee Jollies', President of Charlotte Childrens Nature Museum, President of Mecklenburg T.B. Association, President of Charlotte Southern Lions Club, President of McClintock Junior

16, 2001. Funeral is 11:00 a.m. Monday at Bass-Smith Funeral Home, Hickory. Visitation is 10-11 a.m. Monday at Bass-Smith Funeral Home.

DENTON — Dawson Alexander Snider, 89, died Friday, March 16. Funeral is 3:30 p.m. Monday at Briggs Funeral Home Memorial Chapel. Visitation is 6-7:30 p.m. Sunday at Briggs Funeral Home in Denton.

DENVER — Enid Gladys Hughes died March 17, 2001. Memorial services are 3 p.m. Monday at St. Peter by the Lake Episcopal Church and St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Louisville, KY at a later date yet to be determined.

ELLENBORO — Mr. William Odus Mathis, died Friday, March 16, 2001. Funeral is 2 p.m. Tuesday at Gantts Grove Baptist Church. Visitation will be 7-9 p.m. Monday at McKinney-Landreth Funeral Home.

GASTONIA — Bobby Dean Benge, 59, died Friday, March 16, 2001. Funeral is 2 p.m. Tuesday at Greene Funeral Service (Southside Chapel). Visitation is 7-9 p.m. Monday at Greene Funeral Service (Southside Chapel).

GASTONIA — Mamie Kinley Revels, 74, died Thursday, March 15,

Funeral is 3 p.m. Sunday at Highland Baptist Church. Visitation is 2-3 p.m. Sunday at Highland Baptist Church, Hickory.

LENOIR — William Charles Davis, Jr., 75, died March 16, 2001. Funeral is 11 a.m. Monday at Pendry's Chapel. Visitation is 10-11 a.m. Monday at Pendry's Funeral Home.

LENOIR — Hugh Daniel Gilbert, 81, died March 16, 2001. Funeral is 2 p.m. Tuesday at Miller Hill Baptist Church. Visitation is 7-8:30 p.m. Monday at Pendry's Funeral Home.

LENOIR — Rosa Thomas Woody, 95, died Friday. Funeral is 2 p.m. March 18, 2001 at Greer-McElveen Funeral Home Chapel. Greer McElveen Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.

LEXINGTON — Bill Sink, 82, died Friday. Graveside service is 2 p.m. Monday at Forest Hill Memorial Park. Visitation will follow the graveside service. Davidson Funeral Home is serving the family.

LINCOLNTON — Mr. Ronnie 'Butch' Grant, 52, died Saturday. Funeral is 3 p.m. Monday in the Warlick Funeral Home Chapel. Visitation is 7-8:30 p.m. Sunday at Warlick Funeral Home.

MAXTON — Mrs. Leola Evans Ste-

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Funeral Home

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RALEIGH -
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Thus we all view the world through our own cultural glasses and interpret situations according to our inherent set of values. Naturally these vary according to region, class, group affiliation and individualism, but what may seem like a break to an on looking German, with much laughter and rolled up sleeves, may simply be a different way of getting work done in England. On the other hand the serious dedicated attitude to working situations in German cultural circles may appear cold and machine-like to the Anglo-Saxon onlooker. It is all a question of interpretation, our dictionary being our own set of plausible standards.

The Inadequacy of Dos and Don’ts

In this situation of uncertainty people crave for instruments to help lift the fog enveloping intercultural behaviour. There is no end to articles and books, which endeavour to help the business person with long lists of dos and taboos. People positively grasp at these straws, which promise to save them from daily torrents and pitfalls rather than concentrate on more time-consuming skills. What is forgotten here, however, is that the former are simply part of a static rigid pattern of behaviour, which denies the flexibility and creativeness of human interaction - that very individualism that is rightly so highly prized.

Ideally people should know as much as possible about the foreign culture they are dealing with through background knowledge. A rigid set of values for the foreign culture shrouds the reasons for behaviour and are simply an extension of stereotypical thinking. For instance the slower working pace in many countries (in contrast to Western Europe) may be seen as laziness, whereas increased pace in such hot regions as Saudi Arabia or Central Africa would quickly lead to heatstroke, exhaustion or more severe ailments.

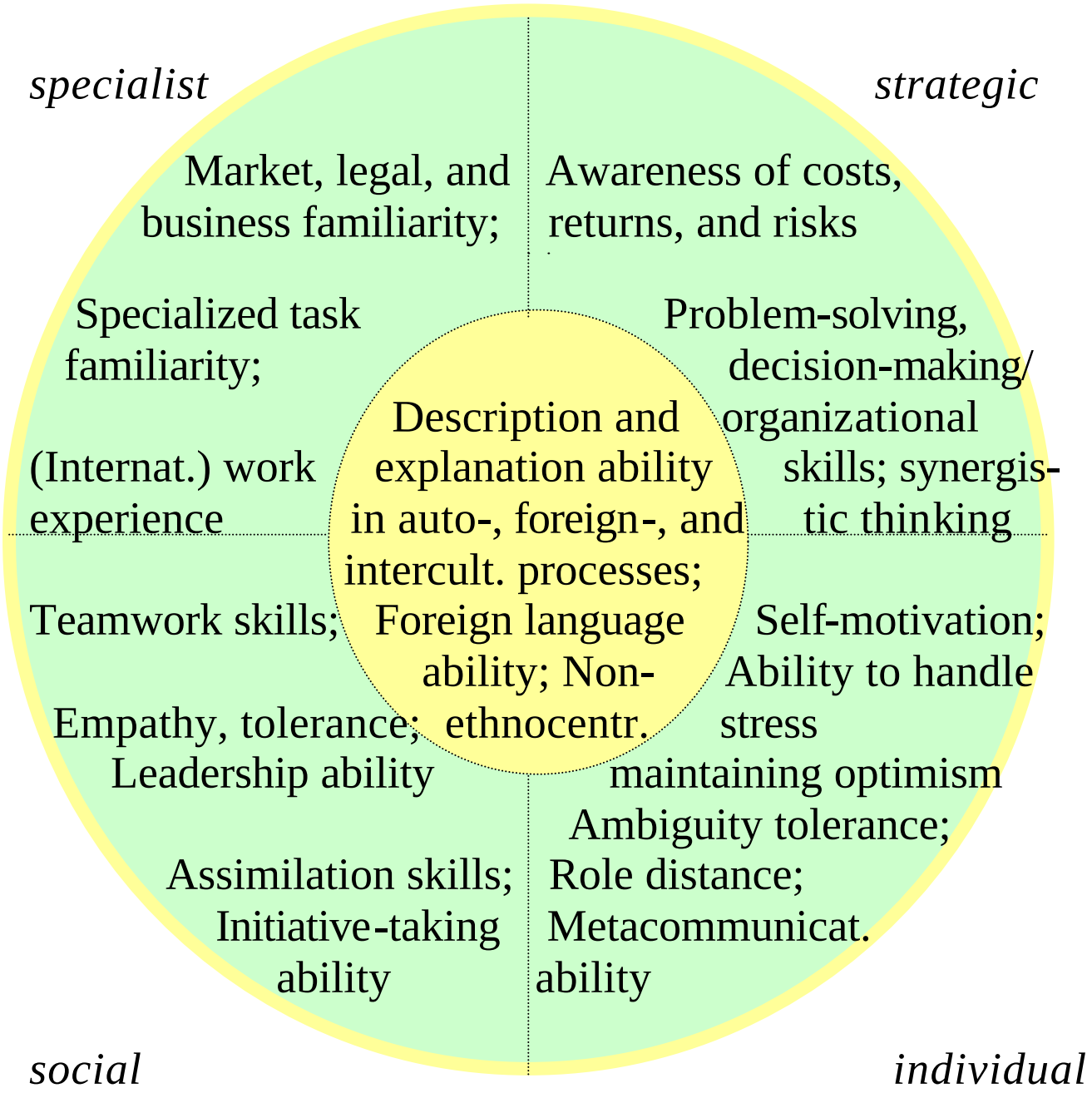
In addition, the more cultures interact, the less people act according to expectations. They no longer remain embedded in their own cultural straightjacket but adapt, as they learn about other cultures. French people do not always kiss the English on both cheeks as they know that the English rarely even shake hands.

Defining and Acquiring Intercultural Competence

The best and most authentic way to learn to deal with foreign cultures is spending time abroad or being in contact with foreign cultures in authentic situations.[iii] Through this a sensitivity towards the intricate nature of interculturality and an awareness of own behaviour naturally develops.

People who successfully overcome the intercultural obstacle course possess a certain mixture of the skills, that amount to what can be called intercultural competence.[iv] It cannot be reduced to one single quality but is rather a combination, with individuals possessing strengths and weakness in different fields.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE



Bolten[v]

Difficult intercultural situations can be clarified through metacommunication, the ability to talk about communication, that is, if something is strange or misunderstood, we can clarify it immediately: “Did I understand that correctly?” However continual use of metacommunication would simply disrupt the flow so it is necessary to develop the ability to withstand ambivalent situations, to withstand the need to react in the hope that time will reveal more. We have to learn to accept the fact that ambiguity belongs as much to interculturality as problems do to communication. Then, there is also the ability to step back and see yourself in strange situations and to imagine how others must view your behaviour. On top of the aforementioned there are, of course, all the hard and soft qualities that makes a good manager or team member such as expertise and leadership. It is a combination of these skills that creates true intercultural competence, as the soft skills alone remain so intangible that in the long term a team member would not receive due respect if expertise in other fields was lacking.

The Desirability of Consensus

Lastly people often strive towards the wrong goals in intercultural teams. Harmony should not be the highest priority but rather getting the work done and finding an acceptable way to do this. Consensus is very often neither attainable nor even always necessarily desirable - as the British put it: let us agree to disagree - but let’s get on with the job. The chances of having different opinions is naturally much greater in international teams and should be regarded as a normal aspect of such teamwork. Yet it is precisely in these circumstances that new ways of operating are created, synergies grow and international teams can then achieve goals beyond the reach of monocultural groups.

[i] *Zeutschel, U., Thomas, A.*: Zusammenarbeit in multikulturellen Teams in: Wirtschaftspsychologie aktuell; 2/2003; 31-39.

[ii] *Galtung, J.*: Struktur, Kultur und intellektueller Stil in: Bolten J. and Erhardt C. (Eds.) Interkulturelle Kommunikation; Berlin: Sternenfels; 2003.

[iii] *Kammerhuber S.*: Anforderungen an interkulturelle Trainings in: Wirtschaftspsychologie aktuell; 2/2003: 26-30.

[iv] *Thomas, A., Kinast, E.-U; Scoll-Machl, S. (Eds.)*: Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kooperation; Vol. 1: Grundlagen und Praxisfelder, Göttingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht; 2003.

[v] *Bolten, J.*: Interkulturelle Kompetenz: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung; Erfurt: Thüringen, 2001; 88.