



Box 21148
665 8 Street SW
Calgary AB, T2P 4H5
Canada

Creating success through understanding

Building Multicultural Teams Means Building Success

by Sarah Elaine Eaton, MA

Does your team lack cohesiveness and understanding because it comprises members from different—even conflicting—cultures? Would your productivity increase if team members from those different cultures could work together more effectively? If so, you may benefit from multicultural team building.

In Canada especially, where multiculturalism is an integral part of our national identity, workplaces are filled with employees and managers from all corners of the globe. Sometimes, the cultural differences that arise in the workplace can create conflict, miscommunication, and diminished productivity. In certain industries, such as health care or manufacturing, these conflicts and miscommunications can increase the risk of injury to others.

So, how do you build and solidify a multicultural team? The first step to bridging cultural differences is awareness. Recognizing that things would run smoother if everyone communicated and respected each other is the first step to solving the problem. In too many cases, managers from the dominant Canadian culture will overlook or brush off cultural issues, because they are difficult to define and, at times, delicate to talk about. People worry about being called bigots or racists when they speak about diversity issues in the workplace.

In my experience, the opposite is true. If a manager has the courage to say, “We have some issues around diversity to examine. By facing up to them, we will build a stronger team, and we will each learn something,” then the veil of embarrassment or discomfort is lifted, and an open dialogue can begin.

This dialogue is the second step. It means giving everyone in the group a voice, and creating a safe space for others to speak and be heard. A moderated dialogue, facilitated by an experienced diversity consultant, will help to keep things focused, and ensure that everyone feels respected.

Awareness and dialogue are not enough, however, to solve the problem. From there, we need to move to action. This involves creating a new culture that is focused on neither traditional Canadian culture, nor the other cultures involved, but on building a strong, diverse, productive, multicultural team. It means shedding old stereotypes, to make way for a new team identity that gives each member an equal voice, and promotes both diversity and productivity.

+1.403.244.9015
www.eatonintl.com

This new culture establishes a new benchmark for tolerance within the organization. It also lays the foundation for new policies, procedures, and other governance issues pertaining to operations and personnel that will keep your team focused and productive.

A new team culture can be built in various ways. It may include:

- identifying key issues and concerns for your organization—what specifically needs improvement? what situations, circumstances, or personnel issues do you need to target?
- training for managers and staff in cross-cultural awareness, management, and conflict management;
- training for staff in expectations of the Canadian workplace, and managerial and operational styles;
- language and/or accent-reduction training, to enhance communications for non-native speakers of English;
- cross-cultural communications training for all staff and managers.

This final step to building a successful multicultural team is crucial. Once communications and awareness issues have been successfully managed, you can move on to applying the new model to enhance your team environment, productivity, and even the bottom line.

With increased trust and awareness, team members will be open to adopting new ways of thinking and working. You will be able to identify specific areas within your team or organization that require attention and find effective solutions that all team members support and are willing to put into action. If you previously had personnel issues rooted in cultural differences, you will be able to identify them, explain why they must be addressed, and, most importantly, you will have the tools to ensure that your staff and managers work effectively and respectfully.

Building multicultural teams is about increasing awareness and tolerance, and eliminating, or at least diminishing, resistance and even conflict. Some of the team-building strategies familiar to North American businesses may work, but multicultural teams have some unique characteristics. Learning to use these productively will benefit you, your team, and your entire organization.

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