Leading
MULTICULTURAL
Teams

By Caroline Yang & Lionel Laroche

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Being a good leader means different things for people in different parts of the world. As the demographics of Manitoba change with over 10,000 immigrants arriving every year and the high birth rate of the First Nations, many Manitoban organizations have a culturally diverse workforce. As a result, leaders need to understand the expectations of the people they are leading. Two cultural dimensions that cause major differences in people's expectations of leaders are hierarchy and individualism.

Hierarchy

Four of the five top source countries of immigrants to Manitoba are the Philippines, India, China, and Korea—all of which have a much more hierarchical social structure than Canada. In a hierarchical society, the psychological distance between a manager and an employee is much greater than that in an egalitarian society. A manager does not need to influence the employee to do what s/he wants the employee to do. S/he just tells the employee what to do and how to do it. The HOW is very important because employees brought up in a hierarchical culture expect their manager to give detailed instructions on how to do the job.

This results in a significant gap when the average Canadian manager, who is used to giving employees a lot of freedom to do their job, manages the average Filipino employee, who expects detailed instructions.

Very often the employee will keep coming back and ask specific questions on every step of the task. In the manager's mind, the employee has no initiative because it is considered part of the employee's job to figure out the HOW. When the manager does not give clear answers to the employee's questions, the employee may perceive the manager as incompetent because managers in the Philippines always provide an answer to the employee's questions.

Not understanding this cultural difference will lead to serious misunderstanding, and very often the employee is perceived as a poor performer and perhaps put on a performance improvement plan. Separating cultural differences and performance issues enable both the manager and the employee to problem-solve in collaboration and build the skills that the employee needs to succeed in the Canadian work environment.

The sense of hierarchy also impacts teamwork. In hierarchical societies, when there is

a disagreement among team members, the manager is usually brought in to act as the referee. In egalitarian societies, team members are more likely to resolve disagreement or even conflict by themselves without relying on a formal authority. When leading a team that includes both egalitarian and hierarchical members, the leader needs to promote open communication in the team and encourage people to sort out minor issues among themselves while making him or herself available before small issues become major problems.

Individualism

The most important aspect of a leader's role is to promote teamwork so that the result of the team's effort is bigger than the sum of the individual inputs. One of the most striking differences related to teamwork is the sense of how individualistically employees should behave or how much they should identify with their group. All of the five top source countries of immigrants to Manitoba have lower scores on the sense of individualism than Canada, which means that people from China, Korea, the Philippine, India, and Germany identify themselves more as group members than as individuals. When translating this into behaviour in the workplace, Canadians give great importance to defining the individual roles and responsibilities of each team member, while people from more collective cultures are less concerned about roles and responsibilities and more ready to help each other.

For example, compare the way a Chinese restaurant operates with the way a Canadian restaurant operates. In a Canadian restaurant, customers are assigned a server. When a customer signals for help, a nearby server will say, "I'll get your server." The server is rewarded by the tip from his or her assigned tables. In a Chinese restaurant, when a customer signals for help, the closest server will go help that customer and the tip is shared among all servers at the end of the shift. Imagine the Canadian server working in a Chinese restaurant; s/he will probably be perceived as lazy and selfish. Conversely, the Chinese server working in a Canadian restaurant is very likely to be perceived as meddling in other servers' affairs or, even worse, stealing their tips.

Leaders of multicultural teams need to address the needs of all employees on the continuum of collective to individualistic tendency. On one hand, leaders need to coach collective team members to understand the importance of personal accountability and help them scope out their job and tasks properly. On the other hand, leaders need to help individualistic team members see the value of supporting each other in order to achieve the common goal.

Recognizing cultural differences and separating them from performance or personality issues will enable leaders to be more effective at leading multicultural teams. When asked what his secret was for lasting so long and being so successful as the president of Yale University, Dr. James R. Angell, explained, "Grow antennae, not horns." To lead today's multicultural teams, leaders need to be sensitive to the needs of their culturally diverse employees and adjust their leadership style to also make their employees successful. ●

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EGALITARIAN PEOPLE TEND TO:	HIERARCHICAL PEOPLE TEND TO:	SOLUTIONS FOR LEADERS LEADING MORE HIERARCHICAL EMPLOYEES:
Focus on experience and ideas	Focus on titles and protocol	Explain the norms of the organization and set expectations
Find out answers themselves	Expect manager to provide specific answers to their questions	Teach employees to find answers by themselves
Make decision without checking with manager	Ask manager to make decision	Provide clear parameters on decision making
Want freedom to do the job	Want clear instructions	Help the employee to plan the first project in detail and coach employee to gradually work more independently
Resolve issues among peers through compromising	Want the manager to judge who is right and who is wrong	Encourage collaborative problem solving while providing coaching

INDIVIDUALISTIC TEAM MEMBERS TEND TO:	COLLECTIVE TEAM MEMBERS TEND TO:	SOLUTIONS FOR LEADERS LEADING MORE COLLECTIVE TEAM MEMBERS:
Be task oriented and focus on roles and responsibilities	Be relationship oriented and focus on team membership	Allocate time for the team to build relationship and update each other on work status
Share information on a need-to-know basis	Share information in a free flowing manner	Explain the norms of the organization, set up a team protocol and provide timely coaching
Consider the impact on themselves when making decisions	Consider the impact on all parties involved when making decisions	Encourage the team to consider the impact of their decision on other team members and provide mechanism for everyone to speak up