

## **Working In Contemporary Teams**

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Factors affecting cross-cultural teams

Welcome back to our course on working in contemporary teams and virtual teams. I'm Dr. M.P. Ganesh from IIT Hyderabad. So we are in this chapter on cross-cultural teams and startup teams.

In the previous class, we spoke about what are cross-cultural teams and what are the challenges in working in cross-cultural teams. So we started with understanding what do we mean by culture. We also looked at how culture impacts individuals at various levels. We also saw how culture can be of different levels.

It can be at a national or regional level. It can be an organizational level which we call it as organizational culture and also every profession has its own culture. So depending on which group you belong to, you will be influenced by the culture of that particular group. So the group can be your profession, your organization or the larger national or regional groups. We also looked at the cultural dimensions which differentiates one culture from the other culture.

So every culture varies in terms of these five dimensions and depending on that, the social norms, the influence on individual's behavior and thought process might vary. We also looked at how cultures can vary in terms of low context and high context. So this is mostly from communication point of view. So in some cultures, people elaborate on the background before coming to the actual issue or actual topic which is called high context cultures. In some cultures, people are very focused on what they want to communicate.

They are very precise to the point. So we also looked at how countries fall in this continuum of low context and high context cultures. We looked at how culture affects communication especially in these aspects. So in the previous lecture, we spoke about how cultural differences exist in terms of vocabulary. So more specifically, some cultures are very direct in the way they communicate.

Some cultures are very indirect in communication. So till this point we saw in the previous lecture. So in this lecture, we will see how cultural differences can exist in terms of the phrases people use. So for example, if British wants to say, our boss will disagree, they will say, our boss might tend to disagree. At the same time, Americans may use different kind of phrases.

So if you see one major difference between Americans and British is, British are very polite and indirect in the way they give feedback or they communicate. On the other hand, Americans might be very direct. Sometimes it may seem like they are very rude. So apart from verbal or communication using languages, non-verbal communication can also vary across different cultures, especially among Eastern and Western cultures, there is a significant difference in terms of how people communicate both verbally and non-verbally. In fact, now recently when people distinguish between cultures, they say Eastern and Western cultures, but now they are talking about global North and global South.

So in globe, people who live in the North, Northern hemisphere, they are supposed to have different kind of habits, belief systems, traditions compared to people who are in the global South. So in terms of non-verbal communication, non-verbal communication is a very important aspect of communication because when we talk about communication, most of the times we only think about communication and verbal communication, what people say in terms of using languages or words. But many a times body language, even without our conscious understanding can have a very important impact on how we understand each other. We assume that language is the only aspect of understanding each other, but in reality non-verbal cues or non-verbal communication plays a very, very important role in conveying the message between individuals. So when we talk about non-verbal communication, these are the aspects we have to be aware of.

So non-verbal communication is a very, very broad area. There is a lot of research done on that. There are a lot of people who either scientifically or theoretically work on these issues. So it is a very broad area. I am not going to cover everything, but I am going to talk to you about some of the important elements of non-verbal communication, which may have an effect on cross cultural interactions.

So one important aspect of non-verbal communication is personal space. So when you talk about space, how space is perceived and how space is handled in different cultures. So when you say space, space is not just physical space. Physical space is also important, but also psychological space is also something which is very subtle when people of different cultures interact with each other. So when you say psychological or social

space, in some cultures, people are okay with crossing the boundaries of personal space.

For example, in Eastern cultures, especially in India, when we meet someone for the first time, when we have a conversation, it is very okay for us to ask things like, are you married? Do you have children? What are your parents doing? To the extent that they may ask about things like your caste and your religion and things like that. But in some cultures, like Western countries, it is very impolite to ask someone about their personal information, like are you married or do you have children? All those things are seen as invasion of privacy. Similarly, in some cultures, like Eastern cultures, in public spaces, it is very okay to, people are very comfortable with staring others. It is a very casual way of looking at each other. But in some cultures, if you do it, it is seen as invasion of privacy.

It is like you are stalking or you are being rude or someone without any etiquette. So staring is seen as something bad in some cultures. On the other hand, like I said, in India, it is very okay to stare people in public spaces. How does it matter in a team context, personal space, especially psychological and social space? When giving feedback, in cultures where personal space is less, they talk about very detailed issues of performance and sometimes that can involve personal information. Their feedback might be very, very subjective, which means it can be very personal.

It can involve things which are not directly related to actual workplace. On the other hand, in cultures where personal space is respected, their feedback will be more specifically on the actual workplace behavior and they will not involve things like their personal details and personal biases. Similarly, physical contact is something which is related to non-verbal communication, which is also related to some extent space. When people talk to each other, how closely they stand to each other. Similarly, when you interact with people in a work context, how close do you stand or how close do you place yourself in that communication physically.

So in some cultures, people are okay with standing close to each other. People are okay with touching each other, even if they are not very close to them in terms of intimacy. So physical contact in terms of touch, the meaning of touch may vary across cultures. So in some cultures, touching is very well defined. There is very clear social norms in terms of in which situation you can touch someone, what kind of relationship you can touch someone, where you can touch someone and things like that and what kind of relationship you are allowed to touch someone.

In some cultures, the norms may not be very clear. It is okay with touching someone or even when you are greeting someone for the first time, when you are meeting someone

and you are greeting them. In some cultures, it is very okay to hug them or touch them. But in some cultures, if you are meeting someone for the first time, you are not allowed to touch them. You might be greeting them with bowing or saying Namaste and things like that.

So depending on the level of informality in terms of touching someone, especially strangers, cultures can be classified into high touch cultures and low touch cultures. So high touch cultures are Mediterranean countries, groups like Arabs, Jews, Eastern Europeans. So like I said earlier, in these cultures, even when you meet someone for the first time, it is okay to touch them, hug them or even kiss them, cheek kiss, they call cheek kiss, they rub the cheeks. But again, there can be gender differences. So you are allowed to do that to people of the same gender.

For example, Arabs and Jews, you can hug people or cheek kiss people of the same gender. But in some cultures like Eastern Europeans, there, if someone of an opposite gender, you can hug them or cheek kiss them if you are meeting them for the first time. I mean, you cannot hug them, but cheek rub, they call cheek rub. So that is allowed in opposite genders. You cannot hug a man if you are a man.

But in Arabs and Jews, maybe if you are a man, you are allowed to hug a man as a way of greeting, but not a woman. So these are some of the intricacies. You cannot generalize and say, all these cultures are high touch cultures, even within them, there might be some differences, some norms. Low touch cultures are like English, Germans, Northern Europeans, many Asian countries. So if you are, for example, some of these countries like Germany, Northern Europe, if you are meeting someone for the first time, you are allowed to shake your hands.

But in Asian countries, even shaking hand is not a cultural aspect. They will be doing like bowing or saying Namaste. So how does it matter in a work context? Let us say in your team, how do you share warmth? How do you share happiness with your team member? How do you share cohesiveness? For example, let us say in a group to share cohesiveness or to share your positive regard, it is very okay to hug. But some people in that particular group who belong to a certain different kind of a belief system, they may think that their personal space is invaded or they may think that or they may feel very uncomfortable with these kind of gestures. So it is very important to understand these differences in terms of physical contact.

So now we are going to look at how culture aspects influences feedback giving and feedback receiving in work context. So when you say feedback, let us say in a team interaction, people may disagree with each other and people may confront each other.

So when the team has people belonging to various cultures, how people give feedback and receive feedback, how people perceive when others give feedback might be a very important issue to understand. So how people of multicultural teams, team members in a multicultural team, how they accept and respond to criticism and positive feedback is something which is like can sometimes break or make the team. If the team members are not sensitive enough, how others perceive them, how cultural differences can play a role in feedback giving and receiving, then it can become a major challenge in terms of communication.

In extreme cases, it can lead to conflicts within the team also. So when you say feedback, it is not necessarily about criticism. It is not necessarily about negative feedback. So feedback can also be positive feedback, which means appreciating others. So for example, let us say in a cross-cultural team context where some members are collectivistic cultures and some members are individualistic cultures.

So when individualistic, person from individualistic culture, when they give feedback, they give it very directly. It can be either positive or negative feedback. So when someone gives negative feedback directly, let us say the one who receives it is from a collectivistic culture, they may see that has someone finger pointing them, someone blaming them. Vis-à-vis the other person from individualistic culture gives positive feedback to someone in the team directly. So this person, if he or she belongs to collectivistic culture, they may perceive it as, they may be very uncomfortable.

They may say, no, no, we all work together. I do not deserve it, things like that. So if that is what is the response of a positive feedback, the other person who saw from the individualistic culture, they may feel why this person is like not taking my positive feedback, they may get offended. So this can be a very dynamic kind of a phenomenon. So you need to understand where is this person coming from when he or she gives positive feedback or negative feedback, why this person is responding like this, what is the cultural influence and how will the other person understand the response for a positive or negative feedback of a person of different cultures.

So it becomes a very dynamic process. Similarly, directedness and indirectness, whether someone gives feedback directly or indirectly and how the other person understands it and responds to it is also something which involves lot of cultural differences. Culture can play a very, very important role. So it may sound very simple, but in an actual communication, team communication, these aspects can, like I said earlier, can lead to lot of miscommunication or conflicts in the team. So we look at how directedness and communication, direct way of communicating in a team, depending on the cultural context can affect the team. So in high context cultures, specific details are

given less importance, especially in feedback giving, if let us say this person is from high context culture, they will talk a lot about the background.

They will not give specific feedback. They will not be very, very direct. They will not be direct. They will be like very indirect in giving feedback. They will be like starting with, yeah, I know you, you did a good job, this, that. In all these indirect contexts, someone may lose the focus on where is this feedback or someone might miss out on the actual feedback, which is given to them.

They may be very unclear about why this communication happened. What exactly is this person trying to tell me? So those confusions can happen when someone from high context culture gives feedback to someone in low context culture. Similarly, in high context cultures, people may give, people may use passive voice. They may not say, I have noticed you doing this. They will say, it is generally observed that what you are doing is not correct.

So they may not own when they give feedback to others. When someone is from high context culture or indirect cultures, they may not own the feedback which they are giving. They will say, somebody told me or others are saying this instead of saying, I feel, I have observed. So when the receiver of feedback is from direct culture or low context culture, they may perceive it as why this person is very political.

He or she is not owning the feedback. Why this person is generalizing everything which is not true. And they may not accept the feedback. So Americans might feel indirectness in communication as tricky. Like I said earlier, if someone is from direct context or high context, low context cultures, they may see indirectness as a very political kind of a behavior, very tricky behavior, very deceptive behavior. They may look at it as this person is of low integrity because this person is not owning their opinion.

So on the other hand, in Eastern cultures, directness is seen as something rude and insensitive. They may feel if someone says, I have observed you doing this. People from Eastern cultures when they receive that kind of feedback, they may feel that this person is hurting my sentiments. This person is like very rude to me and how dare he can blame me for that.

They may look at it as a blame. So let's say an individualistic person giving feedback to a collectivist culture. If it is positive feedback, how will a collectivist culture perceive it? So a collectivist person will perceive a positive feedback from an individualistic culture person as something which is like, they may feel very awkward. They may feel they do not deserve it. They may feel that why this person is praising me too much. And their

reaction will again be something which the individualistic person may not handle.

They may think why this person is not taking my positive feedback. Why this person is disowning my positive feedback. So that can happen. Other way around, a person from individualistic culture giving negative feedback to a collectivistic person. So the collectivistic person may feel it as something as a blame game.

They may feel I am unnecessarily targeted because I belong to a certain culture. All those conflicts can happen. Let's say a collectivistic person giving individualistic culture person a positive feedback. They will be like roundabout in giving positive culture, positive feedback. So the individualistic person may feel why I am not getting the credits for what I have done.

They may feel I am not getting credit for all my hard work. Other way around, a collectivistic person giving negative feedback to an individualistic culture person. So the individualistic person may feel, they may not even see the point in this communication. They may feel everything is fine probably, I am not getting any negative feedback. So they may feel clueless when a collectivistic person gives them a negative feedback.

So these are some of the scenarios. Again, there are other cultural dimensions also like power distance. Especially power distance, giving feedback can be a very, very tricky issue. For example, in high power distance cultures, juniors or people at the lower rank are not expected to give positive or negative feedback to the higher authorities. But in a very low power distance cultures, it is okay to give your boss negative feedback. You can give them what, you can tell them what you actually feel, even irrespective of somebody is your boss or your subordinate.

On the other hand, in high power distance culture, you have to be very careful in giving feedback to your supervisors. It is okay to give feedback to your subordinates, but not the other way around. So feedback happens top down, not bottom up in highly power distance culture. But in low power distance culture, it is very flat. So feedback giving can happen both top down or bottom up or even horizontally.

So how do we handle cultural differences? So a very important thing about working in cross-cultural teams is you need to understand people are different. So it is not necessarily cultural difference in terms of nationalities. Even within the same country, a country like India, there can be a lot of differences. So you have to be very careful in acknowledging or understanding that differences might exist.

And you need to get familiarized with the differences. It is better to clarify, it is better

to openly tell them, see, I know there are cultural differences. I know that your belief systems might be different from my belief systems. So let us talk. This is what I feel. is my assumption correct? Especially in non-verbal communication, we have to be very, very careful.

A simple thing like head nod. We talk about head nod, nodding the head in India. In most countries, yes and no, there is a difference in terms of head nod. But in India, yes means vertically, no means horizontally, nodding your head.

But in a country like India, we nod sideways. Sideways nodding. People of certain cultures may not understand. They may feel whether this person is saying yes or no, we don't know. So in those kinds of contexts, it is better to clarify, ask them, what does it mean in a very sensitive kind of manner. And like I said, don't assume, familiarize with yourself with these differences, especially in the forming and norming stage. If you are in a cross-cultural team, you have to spend a lot of time to understand these cultural nuances, both verbal, non-verbal, communication differences, differences in terms of belief systems.

You should not assume. And whenever there is doubt, we need to clarify and check. So like I said, it is better to ask people directly. When I say directly to them itself, this is what I feel, my understanding correct or not. And also, let's say if you're working in a cross-cultural virtual team, if you are, people of different cultures are working in different geographical locations in the same project.

In initial stages, we have to be very careful about choosing the media. You have to choose which media or media which facilitates social presence. The previous chapter, we looked at social presence and media richness. So we need to use those media tools so that communication becomes very transparent and clear. And more specifically, if you are in the early stages, like forming and norming, you are in a virtual team and also this is like a cross-cultural team, you have to be very careful about choosing the media.

And also use multiple media whenever possible. Let's say if there's a team meeting, use video conferencing and then distribute the minutes of the meeting through email or put it in an electronic bulletin board so that everybody's clear about what is said, what is understood and how people give feedback or what people perceive about what is said in the room. And more importantly, we should not generalize. When we think about culture, there is a difference between understanding other's culture and stereotyping. So stereotyping means generalizing without understanding. So for example, we think that Americans have an indigenous skin, may not necessarily be true.



Some Americans can be very collectivist. And when you think about Indians, you cannot assume that they have high power distance. Maybe there can be generational differences. The millennials could be possibly more low power distance. They are more liberal and they value equality and things like that.

Or again, these generational differences can also be stereotypical. Depends on various factors. So it's better to communicate, understand, get familiarized, without assumption, be open. And very, very important aspect of cross-cultural communication is being empathetic. When I say empathetic, try to look at things from their point of view and not jump into conclusion. The problem with communication in teams is whether it is cross-cultural or homogeneous teams, many times we assume this is what is true.

And many times we generalize and jump into conclusion. So it's very, very important to have those discussions in a very open kind of communication where we understand and give the other person space with empathy so that people may not judge each other. So non-judgmental, empathetic communication is very important, whether it is a cross-cultural team or a homogeneous team. So I'll stop here because we have covered one important section of cross-cultural teams. So to put it in a nutshell, in a cross-cultural team, we have to be very careful about the belief systems and values which may vary across cultures. And culture can be a very strong factor influencing people's belief systems, their actual behavior, their attitude.

So we have to be sensitive, especially communication, there might be very strong cultural differences. When I say communication, it can be both verbal, non-verbal. So even verbal, what is said, you have to be very careful in terms of cultural differences of using phrases, giving feedback, how you choose certain words, all those things. Also in non-verbal communication, we need to understand the differences in terms of space, both psychological and physical space. And also non-verbal communication, how it affects directedness or indirectedness of communication.

And especially in feedback giving and receiving, how in different contexts, like individualistic, collectivistic, when people give feedback, receive feedback, how people react to certain feedbacks. So all those things are very important. So there are certain things you have to be very careful. As a core principle, you have to be very empathetic, listen to others, not generalize and assume. So I will stop here. In the next lecture, we will talk about startup teams.