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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Just like a Jazz Quintet, group creativity will not happen without the diversity of ideas, experience and perspectives each person brings to the group. It is not unnatural to expect that the process of idea generation, creation, and judgments is influenced by the mindsets created by social culture. Read on to find out about the dimensions of culture and the implications for group creativity.

Culture and the Implications for Group Creativity

Many of us may have experienced first-hand that creativity results from diversity. Although culturally diverse groups can be powerful, providing a source of experience and creative thinking necessary for innovation and solving complex problems, cultural differences can interfere with group creativity if not understood and managed effectively.

Research has shown that cultural differences can impact how people do business, from the way people think to how people negotiate. It is not unnatural therefore to expect that the process of idea generation, creation and judgments is influenced by the mindsets created by social culture. Studies on cross-cultural management point to a set of cultural dimensions along which dominant value systems can be ordered. These value systems affect human thinking, feeling, and acting, and the behavior of organizations and institutions in predictable ways. The following chart highlights several of these dimensions and the implications for group creativity.

Cultural Dimension		Implications for group creativity
<i>Individualism versus Collectivism</i>		Can cause perception problem about motivation. Collectivists often see individualists as only looking out for themselves and more self-serving rather than team players. Individualists may see collectivists as lacking commitment or initiative. Both perspectives can lead to a break down in trust; an important element in group creativity.
A culture where ties between individuals are loose; each person is expected to take care of themselves and not rely upon others.	Members consider it socially desirable to put group goals ahead of individual goals. The success of whole is far more important than the success of any one member.	

<i>Task/Content versus Relationship/Process</i>		Too much emphasis on task can jeopardize the group maintaining harmony and flow necessary for idea generation and creation. Too much emphasis on process can jeopardize the job getting done. Creativity is about finding the balance between art and discipline.
Refers to the work of the group and tends to be measured as an outcome in terms of productivity or quality.	Indexed by the relationships between group members and tends to be measured as an outcome in terms of member satisfaction or group cohesion.	
<i>Power Distance</i>		It is likely that people of different cultures will react differently to different leadership styles. For example, an aboriginal employee with a good idea may find it difficult to speak up in the presence of their elders. Senior employees or managers may not be receptive to the ideas of younger workers. Often, if person in a position of authority is present in a group creativity session, the level of creativity will be stifled; group members tend not to speak up and only look to that person for ideas.
Individuals are comfortable with hierarchy and authority relationships. Leadership and guidance is given by position, title, status, or power; the weight of that position is the strongest influence on the group.	Individuals are uncomfortable with hierarchy and authority relationships. Expects leadership in a group to be dependent on expertise, talent, and skill required at a given time.	
<i>Uncertainty Avoidance</i>		Tolerance of ambiguity and risk taking is often identified as important for creativity. The need for the "right" answer can have a negative impact on the creative process. For some cultures reason, logic, numbers, are good while intuition, emotions, qualitative thinking and failure are seen as bad. Creativity is about finding the balance between intuition and fact.
Comfortable with change and unstructured situations, even when they cannot reliably predict the results of change.	Not comfortable with unstructured situations. Take strong steps to increase predictability, often with written and unwritten rules that everyone must follow.	
<i>Masculine versus Feminine</i>		"Facilitation" techniques used for brainstorming are more of a nurturing type, affecting the social and emotional interactions of group members. In strongly masculine cultures, these can be seen as feminine issues and are not valued.
Cultures in which there is a strong distinction between the strong male role and the nurturing female role, i.e. Japan and Austria.	Cultures in which men and women are equally willing to be strong and nurturing, i.e. Norway and Sweden.	

<i>Explicit versus Implicit Communication</i>		Possibility of miscommunication based on assumptions, lack of knowledge or misunderstandings. Paying attention to voice tone, speed of speech, silence, taking turns, and language with which ideas are expressed is important.
Communicates directly; tells it like it is; communication is mainly in the words.	Attends to nonverbals and symbolism; everything around the words matters more than the words themselves.	
<i>Long-term versus short-term orientation</i>		A push for quick solutions may cause a group to minimize the idea generation phases of the creative process, and cause the group to miss out on innovative solutions. Risk taking may be discouraged for short term results. Failures or setbacks are seen as negative.
Individual is accustomed to working toward building strong positions in their markets and do not expect immediate results. Individuals are allowed time and resources to make their own contributions.	The "bottom-line" (the results of the past month, quarter, or year) is a major concern; control systems are focused on it and individuals are constantly judged on it.	

While it is helpful to have an understanding of cultural differences as it relates to group creativity we need to avoid the tendency of making stereotypes and assumptions about cultural differences. We must always be curious about cultural differences, starting with the individual first and asking appropriate questions to better understand their differences.

Here are some suggestions when leading culturally diverse groups through the creative process:

- Recognize that people of different cultures will react differently to the various components of the creative process; some will love the idea generation and creation phase while others will be biting on the bit to judge the ideas and move into action planning; be prepared to use processes that will attend to the different styles.
- Provide group members with the opportunity to understand and discuss their differences in style, culture, and personality so that the group can make adjustments to their understanding and perspectives about each other. This will also contribute to building rapport and trust in the group. Alternatively, talk or meet one-on-one with group members to hear their views and look for ways to help them establish strong relationships with each other.
- The priorities of both task and relationship need to be balanced, and at different times, in different contexts, each could be a high priority. In group meetings, it is important to keep things on track, but it is also imperative that a positive group culture is cultivated; one that encourages everyone to contribute.
- Look for positive ways to position those individuals who have different ideas and communication styles than other group members.
- When facilitating group meetings, make an effort to draw out the views of less-vocal group members; solicit written input in advance or change speakers if necessary.
- Create opportunities for the group to meet in comfortable social settings.

What's the Bottom line

When group members understand and are able to discuss their cultural differences, it becomes possible for each group member to participate effectively in each different aspect of the creative process.

Coming up with a great idea is one thing, however, being able to sell it to others is often considered far more daunting. Read more on how to improve the odds of your ideas being accepted and implemented.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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