

Cultural Diversity in a Multilingual and Multicultural Cosmopolitan Workplace

*Ms.Santhoshi.Ramu

*Assistant Professor, MLA Academy of Higher Learning

Abstract:

Globalization is no longer restricted to certain economies. Companies are operating in more than one country and hence are forced to restructure their business in order to meet the constant change in demand. This crossing of geographical boundaries by the companies gives the birth of multicultural organization where workforces are becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. Managing global workforces has increased pressure on Human Resource managers to recognize and adapt to cultural differences, which when ignored can result in cross-cultural misunderstandings. India and especially Bangalore is no exception and has become a favorite spot for many of the foreign companies to invest in, in order to utilize the high skilled labor force of India at a cheaper rate when compared to other countries in the world. This paper is an attempt to study cross-cultural issues faced by workplaces in a multicultural cosmopolitan like Bangalore.

Keywords: multi, cross cultural, human resource, barriers, language

Introduction

Following economic reforms under new leadership, India also joined the global market in 1991 and, since then, the Indian information revolution phase began; India was “churning out...some of the most gifted engineering, computer science and software talent on the globe” (Friedman, 2005, p.104).

Bangalore: Once called a pensioner’s paradise for its well laid residential layouts, wide roads, parks and most of all the pleasant weather, Bangalore has, in the last decade or so risen unreasonably and overly fast to become a hub for Information technology. This swift and illogical rise has transformed Bangalore also aptly called the Silicon Valley into a multilingual and multicultural cosmopolitan city. This rise has also changed the city rapidly and drastically, pushing the city limits all around unreasonably, increasing the migrant population along with the job opportunities.

Thanks to globalization, multinational companies have mushroomed all over the city extending well over into the suburbs. This has encouraged a lot of migrant work force settling in Bangalore, working in many of these companies. The migrant workforce includes people from many of the Indian states as well as people from abroad; people who do not know the local language and culture; people who don’t mind working in spite of all the constraints.

Language Barriers

Kannada is or as is now, was a predominant language spoken in Bangalore. Even people who came and settled in Bangalore adapted and adopted the local language and culture. But this has changed over time. People from other states and countries now have come and settled in the city making it a melting pot of different languages. Nowadays even the local vendors and shopkeepers speak in other regional languages to cater to the enormous non Kannada speaking population.

English was and is another language which has been predominant in Bangalore as a language which connects people who don’t speak the local language. It has over the years been peppered by the various regional speakers. Even though English is an important prerequisite in job hiring in any company, the HR managers are nowadays finding it difficult to find candidates who speak good English and hence compromise on hiring people who don’t speak good English.

Cultural Barriers

Bangalore with a population of over 15 million (as of January 2016) is the fifth largest city in India and 27th largest city in the world. Bengaluru is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country, with over 62% of the city's population comprising migrants from other parts of India. Historically a multicultural city, Bengaluru has experienced a dramatic social and cultural change with the advent of the liberalization and expansion of the information technology and business process outsourcing industries in India. IT companies in Bengaluru employ over 35% of India's pool of 1 million IT professionals. This social and cultural change has also brought with it innumerable problems with communication not just in schools, homes but also in workplaces.

Cross Cultural Issues in a Workplace

It's no secret that today's workplace is rapidly becoming vast, as the business environment expands to include various geographic locations and span numerous cultures. What can be difficult, however, is understanding how to communicate effectively with individuals who speak another language, or who rely on different means to reach a common goal. For those of us who are not native English-speakers, it is fortunate that English seems to be the language that people use if they want to reach the widest possible audience. However, even for native English speakers, cross-cultural communication can be an issue. In this new world, good cross-cultural communication is a must.

Potential Problems Areas

International business executives perceive language differences to be the primary reason for difficulty in cross-cultural communication, followed by the concept of time and telephone etiquette (Chaney, Martin, 2012).

Communication: Language and Expression

The quality of communication is a key concern in cross cultural teams. English as a means of communication has been expected and accepted. But there are strains and other distortions like slang, jargon or colloquialisms which can lead to misinterpretations. Local languages tend to be seep into conversations with team members. People speaking the same language might be in the ok but for people who do not understand have a major disadvantage which can lead to problems.

Background

Where an employee lives or has lived can contribute to cultural differences in the workplace. Many people would agree that there is a distinct difference between the employee from a small town and the employee from a large metropolis. His social status, education and mostly his upbringing can affect diversity.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity or national or regional origin are often examples of cultural differences in the workplace, particularly where communication, language barriers or the manner in which business is conducted are obviously different. Affinity groups have gained popularity in large organizations or professional associations. There are companies where certain managers hire only members from their ethnic groups or cities promoting ethnic differences in the organization.

Inflexible Attitude

It is a proven fact that some people when they enter a different cultural context then avoid exposure or experience of the host culture. This results in introvert behavior and closed mindset, leading to an impression that the visitor is not accepting the host culture. Such a

behavior, whether consciously or unconsciously, dampens the team spirit and deteriorates the business relationships.

Domination

There are concerns that a section of the team that has a certain cultural similarity or homogeneity may attempt to dominate the team process and overrule the rest of the team. The dominant group within the team may try to swing decisions towards a direction that they are comfortable with. This can create a frustrating environment for the rest of the team.

Overcoming Barriers

Liswood (2010) advises that leaders need to come up with plans for integrating this diversity, to benefit from the long necks and the stripes, instead of waiting for organization-wide conformity. Diversity issues will continue until “everyone in the workplace learns and understands that their own inherent behaviors and unconscious approaches are likely hindering success for everyone. In a true meritocracy, the benefit of diversity will emerge only when we become aware and conscious of how we feel about the other...It will occur when we become aware of the subtle ways in which some in the ark are advantaged while others are disadvantaged...Only then can we understand how the beliefs, roles, shoulds, should nots, values...that we bring into the workplace affect one another” (Liswood, 2010, p.3).

Cross cultural teamwork is going to increase as businesses expand on a more global scale meaning that people from diverse backgrounds interact on a regular basis as a team. Many large corporations have clients with whom they work across multiple countries and these clients look for integrated global solutions. Team output is usually better when there is diversity of experience among the team players. Diversity is a factor that works in favour of cross cultural teams. The general consensus among experts is that the multi-cultural experiences that individual team members bring to the discussion tends to lead to superior creative solutions.

When one does communicate, they have to keep in mind that even though English is considered the international language of business, it is a mistake to assume that every businessperson speaks good English. In fact, only about half of the 800 million people who speak English learn it as a first language. And, those who speak it as a second language are often more limited than native speakers.

Using some small but important pointers may reduce if not entirely eliminate these issues.

- The speaker or the employee who tries to communicate cross-culturally has to make particular efforts to keep their communication clear, simple and unambiguous.
- Humor is notoriously culture-specific: many things that pass for humor in one culture can be seen as grossly offensive in another.
- Clear communication is essential for effective functioning and so as not to offend anybody in particular, learning few key phrases a few greetings may go a long way in reducing tension among the team members.
- Taking time to research another culture, their food habits, language, customs and traditions will make things comfortable between people.
- Be open to trying new things. The idea is not to create boundaries, but to build bridges and open the door to cultural differences.

Conclusion

Change is inevitable. Every city and every country goes through constant changes. While cultural diversity may be the new norm, the possible challenges of diversity cannot be ignored. Language and cultural barriers may make it difficult to communicate effectively or cultural differences may inhibit internal and external employees from being comfortable enough to open up, socialize or bond. It must be understood that no amount of training can ever cover or

prepare any individual for any kind of scenario relating to cultural differences. Since we live in a growing cosmopolitan city like Bangalore which is going to see a lot of more of growth and development, adapting and adopting change may become the need of the hour.

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