

## How To Make Meetings Work in a Culturally Diverse Group

A meeting held in a culturally diverse environment is anything but business as usual. In fact, meetings can be the arena where differences in cultural programming show themselves most clearly...or confusingly, as the case may be.

- Have you ever felt frustrated when you throw a question out to the group and all you get are polite smiles, or people who won't look you in the eye?
- Are you irritated when you expect a lively discussion of the pros and cons of a plan you are considering, and you get no discussion at all?
- When voices get raised and it seems that the discussion is turning contentious and angry, do you wonder what went wrong?

### Maybe it's cultural

While the behaviors you expect are second nature to you, they might not be to someone born in a different country or socialized in a different culture. Think about your group. What different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures are represented in your meetings? Then take a look at the behaviors you value and expect of people at those meetings. These might include:

- speaking out
- making suggestions
- disagreeing with someone in an authority role
- stating an opinion
- taking "no" for an answer
- giving criticism
- asking questions
- speaking in a moderate, conversational tone
- seeing other points of view
- making presentations
- accepting praise

Which of these bother you when they're absent? Could it be they're not happening because they're discouraged in some cultures?

For example, in many cultures, people in authority roles (bosses, teachers, group leaders, elders) are seen as the ones with the answers. Making a suggestion to one of these people might be seen as disrespectful, causing him/her to lose face. Asking questions or requesting clarification might seem to imply that the person is unable to make him/herself clear or doesn't know what he/she is talking about.

Different cultures also have different ideas about what constitutes a normal, civil discussion. Raised voices and vehement tones may be interpreted very differently by different people. What one person would see as a normal, if spirited conversation, another might perceive as an angry argument. On the other hand, a person who expects more feeling and fervor in a discussion might mistake a restrained or soft-spoken delivery as a lack of enthusiasm.

Another source of misunderstandings is a difference in attitudes about "the rules." American majority culture values structure and holds that there are many unwavering rules and limits that apply to everyone. In some other cultures, the expectation is that just about *anything* is negotiable. An initial "no" is seen as just an opening argument, not a final pronouncement. This can leave one party irritated because his/her credibility is being questioned, and one baffled by the other's rigid refusal to engage in negotiations.

It's important to understand that none of these ways of behaving and looking at the world is right, or better than the others--**they're just different**. People with diverse backgrounds can work well together and come to appreciate each other's cultures, as long as they make the effort to understand and accommodate their differing values and points of view.

Here are some things that you as a leader can do to help:

### **1. Examine expectations**

Get the group to talk about what they want from each other in meetings, and what each person feels able to give. Encourage them to give each other feedback and to confirm that they're really understanding what someone is saying, and why. If people have different styles or ways of seeing the same behavior, encourage them to talk it through and try to understand the other's point of view. See what accommodations and compromises people can make for each other. Just exploring unspoken assumptions and learning what's behind another person's attitudes and behavior can clear up many misunderstandings.

People may be willing to go against some of their cultural norms, but it should be their choice, and one they are reasonably comfortable with. Be realistic about what you can expect people to change. For example, someone raised in a culture where singling out and praising an individual in front of others is taboo may always respond to public compliments with a certain amount of discomfort. You may need to find other ways to let that person know that he/she is valued and appreciated.

### **2. Create a comfortable tone**

No matter how good a relationship you have with your members, the communication dynamics change in a more formal setting. Meetings intimidate some people; no one wants to look foolish in front of their peers. Cultural programming just complicates the matter. Setting a nonthreatening, comfortable tone should be first on your agenda.

You can reduce anxiety and increase participation by starting with a warm-up activity that breaks the ice and gets everyone participating right away. There are several techniques that may help.

- Ask open-ended questions like "So your biggest concern about this plan is..." or "The pros and cons of this system is..." or "If you could make just one change in this project, it would be..."
- Ask for a simple numerical evaluation such as "On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the effectiveness of this new procedure."

### **3. Use small groups to get participation without violating cultural norms.**

One of the laws of group dynamics is that the smaller the group, the greater the safety; therefore, the more the participation. The use of small groups can be your ally in working around cultural norms that may discourage people from speaking up and standing out from the whole group. Let's take a look at how this works. Say you're planning an event and trying to put together an action plan and a timeline. You want to encourage people to look for potential problems and unrealistic expectations, so you can refine the plan now. One way to respect cultural "rules" and still get the input you need is to break people up into small groups where they can *collectively* list the possible glitches in your plan. Then no one individual has to be responsible for the criticism and not everyone has to speak before the whole group.

### **4. Write down the meeting content**

In a multilingual arena, giving people two ways to absorb the information increases your effectiveness as a communicator. Many people for whom English is a second language have an easier time understanding written English than hearing it spoken. Use handouts, flipcharts, chalkboards, whiteboards, even butcher paper taped to the wall to get your message across. Write down the agenda and the major points of the discussion. This allows people to integrate the information at their own pace.