

# **‘Constructing the Team’ – A multi-cultural experience**

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There is an increasing trend towards design teams comprising individuals from several countries. These cross-cultural collaborations have the potential to produce more innovative and higher quality solutions than may be offered by mono-cultural work groups. However, a common understanding of cultural values must be attained if a multi-cultural team is to function effectively, as a lack of sympathy to cultural differences can result in the raising of barriers that can inhibit effective teamwork and ultimately result in a confrontational environment. Orchestrated training events have been shown to be very useful in overcoming this problem.

This paper describes such an event, which was driven by the creation of an Anglo-American design team to design a £100M+ pharmaceutical laboratory. The organisation, facilitation, and outcomes of the workshop are discussed in relation to issues of cultural diversity and interdisciplinary working.

This paper will be of interest to clients and project teams planning a cross-cultural collaborative design project and organisations looking to become part of a Joint Venture with overseas partners.

## **Introduction**

Business organisations have recently discovered that the subject of intercultural communication must be considered seriously, not only because they are dealing with an increasing number of foreign clients but also because more and more alliances are being formed with organisations based in other countries (Limaye and Victor 1995). Collaboration between internationally dispersed organisations is becoming commonplace in the contemporary business environment and it is now generally recognised that the purely national business – one which employs, buys from, and sells to, people of only one nationality – is an endangered species that no one is likely to preserve (Barnard 1995). Cultural diversity in the global economy is now a reality as most nations and many multi-national companies have international facilities and do business on a global basis (Harris and Moran 1987). Thus, Multi-national businesses are now recognising that the key to success in this global marketplace rests in the development and prevalence of cross-cultural workgroups. Indeed, any organisation instigating international business relations must recognise that people of differing cultural backgrounds must work together and as a result both temporary and permanent cross-cultural work groups will be formed (Granrose and Oskamp 1997).

Common understanding of cultural values must be attained if a multi-national team is to work effectively as a lack of sympathy to cultural differences can result in the raising of barriers that can inhibit effective teamwork and ultimately promote a confrontational environment within the unit. It has been shown that the negative effects on performance resulting from an adversarial atmosphere within a work group can be both extensive and far reaching (Austin, Steele, MacMillan, Kirby, Spence 1999). As such, the ability of a team to succeed in a Multi-cultural environment will depend upon its member's skills and abilities as inter-cultural

communicators (Samovar and Porter 1995) as much as their ability to work effectively as complimentary components of an interdisciplinary unit.

Kolb and Fry (1975) suggest that culture, and indeed nationality, can be related to important aspects of socialisation such as family, school, work and ultimately, learning style. However, the word *culture* in itself is a little too elusive to define absolutely (Limaye and Victor 1995). The fact that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identify in excess of one hundred definitions of the term - e.g. The collective programming of the mind; a system of shared values and beliefs, the way in which a group of people solves problems - only serves to accentuate the debate surrounding the concept of culture. For the purposes of this paper the definition provided by Barnard (1995) will be utilised:

*'An individual way of perceiving and responding to the world made up of values, beliefs, attitudes and pre-conceptions which themselves result from the effect on our individual minds of the sum-total of our influences and experiences'*.

The important factor to remember is that the prosperity of an ever-increasing number of organisations is dependent upon the successful collaboration between nations with very different cultural backgrounds. As such, more and more projects will require the services of multi-cultural interdisciplinary teams.

### **Multi-cultural team working**

According to Granrose and Oskamp (1997), 'Multi-national teams offer the potential for more innovative and higher quality solutions to global business problems than do mono-cultural teams'. This owes much to the fact that effective Multi-cultural teams develop synergistic approaches to their work by integrating and building upon the different perspectives brought by their individual members (Maznevski and Peterson 1997). These individual perspectives, which arise from the processes and out-come of cross-cultural group working, can be both highly creative and innovative as the team benefits from an increased diversity in knowledge and understanding. However, it is important to recognise that a lack of awareness of, and sensitivity to, differences in culture, working practices and aspirations (Barnard 1995) can also have negative effects on almost every aspect of business life within a multi-national business venture. For a group of individuals from a variety of nations to work effectively as a team, each individual must have not only a specialist discipline, but also be an effective intercultural communicator and negotiator, promote cultural synergy (Harris and Moran 1987) and strive for shared understanding within the unit.

### **Facilitating effective cross-cultural inter-disciplinary working**

With today's IT capabilities it is not unreasonable to suggest that a team could be formed, and a project completed, in a virtual environment without the individual members of that team ever having to leave their respective offices, let alone meet. However, people have no automatic feeling of goodwill toward one another without meeting face-to-face (Barnard 1995). As such, the part played by goodwill in successful communication should never be underestimated - although it very often is. However, it is asking a great deal of individuals to expect them to build equanimity with someone they have never met, let alone expect them to externalise and align their cultural differences during the rigours and pressures of live interdisciplinary working. Orchestrated training events can be very useful in overcoming these problems.

Intercultural training events can help to predict difficulties that may arise during a multi-cultural strategic alliance. Additionally, and possibly more importantly, they provide opportunity for each individual involved to begin to recognise their own inabilities and weaknesses in communication skills which will allow them to realise that what they may have perceived originally as being obstinacy was actually only a failure to comprehend (Barnard

1995). Moreover, focused training events of this nature provide prime opportunity for team building, as they enable team members to become familiar with one another in an informal environment, thus generating the goodwill that may have remained unrealised had a wholly virtual collaborative environment been established. This paper will describe such an event, held in September 1999, which marked the first meeting of an Anglo-American JV between the US based architectural practice, CUH2A, and the UK based design offices of the large Multi-national Interdisciplinary organisation, AMEC. For the purposes of this strategic collaboration, the amalgamated group was named: 'International Design Associates' (IDA). The catalyst for this alliance was the client, who had worked with both companies on previous projects and had envisaged many possible benefits from a strategic collaboration. Although IDA was established solely for this project, it was recognised that success in this venture could lead to repeat work and encourage a long-term relationship. After much negotiation concerning location of the IDA offices, it was agreed that a neutral location would be utilised, namely Centrepoint, London. This decision was taken in a bid to enhance the:

- Benefits gained from having an integrated design team based locally to the site.
- Integration of the designers into a more effective team.
- Feeling of unity within IDA (remove the concept of 'them and us')

Most importantly, it has been shown that distance has the effect of magnifying differences between people (Barnard 1995). As such, it was felt that proximity would allow similarities and differences to be revealed and shared, which would in turn lead to improved collaboration.

### **The inter-cultural workshop**

The two-day 'Intercultural Workshop' took place in the tranquil setting of Barnett Hill; a quintessentially English country estate which, prior to becoming a management training and conference centre, had been used as both a private residence and a 'Red-Cross' hospital. The main aims of the workshop were to: i) explore the issues of team working from different cultural perspectives; ii) provide the JV with a framework for understanding organisational and cultural differences; and iii) establish and discuss mutual expectations and allay any possible concerns. The workshop was led by Babel, an experienced language and culture consultant and workshop facilitator, who has a background in both the pharmaceutical and construction industries. The day was based around four key exercises: i) the card game; ii) cultural debate; iii) force field analysis; and iv) the 'prisoners dilemma' type game. Of the twenty-four participants who attended the event, twelve representing each organisation, only six had had prior experience of cross-cultural working.

After some basic introductions, the facilitator gave a brief presentation in a bid to define culture. This was followed by a short card game.

### **The card game**

The participants divided into six teams of four. No verbal communication was allowed between participants. Upon each table rested a pack of cards and a list of rules to the game (based loosely on whist). Once read the rules were removed and the participants were asked to play for five minutes, after which the player who had won the most hands had to leave the group and proceed in a clockwise direction to the neighbouring table where the game would begin again. However, unbeknown to the participants, each table had been designated a different set of rules. These differences only came to light when a hand was claimed incorrectly. The confusion that this generated was compounded by the fact that no verbal communication was allowed. Only after becoming aware that differences in value existed could the participants make these explicit, thus ensuring that the group functioned with a common understanding. After 30-minutes of play and five rotations the facilitator outlined several lessons to be learnt from the exercise:

- A culture can be particular to one group and not another
- Culture influences the behaviour of a group
- Cultures can hold different systems of value
- Cultures are learnt and are not hereditary, they are simply passed from one generation to the next

The participants were then asked to discuss the exercise and outline issues that they felt could help improve collaboration during the joint venture. A number of key issues were raised:

- Be aware that different cultures exist even if they are not recognised explicitly
- Communication between members of a group is vital
- Common understanding must be reached at the outset of a venture
- A standard set of rules (a framework) may help reduce misunderstandings during the JV
- Expect conflict to arise but ensure that it leads to positive actions and improved understanding
- If no existing understanding/framework exists then a new one should be agreed for the purposes of this JV

It was concluded that a common understanding of cultural values must be achieved within the group to ensure effective and incident free working. This is an issue that has been recognised previously by Barnard (1995).

### **The cultural debate – the layers of culture**

In order to develop group understanding of the potential cultural inconsistencies within IDA, the participants were asked to list, and provide examples of, known and perceived cultural differences between the United Kingdom and the USA. A section of the generated list is illustrated in table 1.

<b>Cultural differences</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Behaviours	Accents and language
Rules	Driving: opposite sides of the road
Currency	Pounds, Dollars, pence, cents
Interpretations/expectations	Thermal comfort levels, wages
Tradition	Holidays, foods, clothing
History	Thousands Vs hundreds, of years
Religion	Few religions, many religions
Professional codes/practices	RIBA, AIA
Perceptions/Stereo-types	Loud, outspoken - prudish, conservative

**Table 1** Illustration of section of cultural differences table

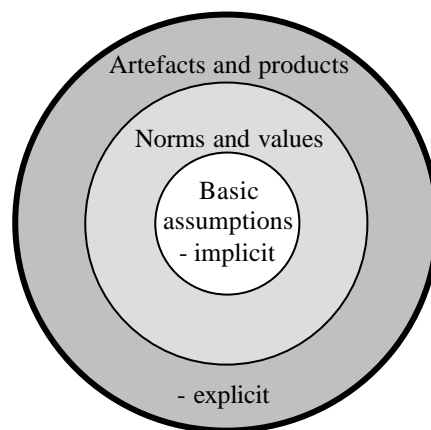
All participants agreed that these issues were fairly explicit and could be recognised by the majority of people. However, the facilitator suggested that these represented merely the surface layer, i.e. the explicit culture, of a much more complex system; a model of which is shown in figure 1. This model, which was developed by Trompenaars (1995), differentiates between three layers of meaning within culture:

### ***Explicit***

The reality of a culture represented by the observable and symbolic issues. It is on this level that stereotypes and prejudices are formed.

### ***Norms and values***

Norms are the mutual sense a group has of what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. These can be both informal and formal. Conversely, values determine how the terms 'good' and 'bad' within that group are defined. In summary, 'norms provide a feeling of how a culture should behave, whereas values provide a feeling of how a culture aspires to behave' (Trompenaars 1995).



**Figure 1** A model of culture (Trompenaars 1995)

### ***Assumptions about existence***

The deepest layer reflects the fact that culture is the result of a need to survive in a given environment. Humans strive to develop ways of surviving more efficiently. Within time these ways of being are undertaken subconsciously and are assumed, i.e. they become routine responses to the environment in which that group has settled. Thus, cultural differences at this level are extremely difficult to recognise as it is only by encountering a different set of cultural assumptions that a group can understand that its own culture is not universal.

The major difficulties arising from cross-cultural working rest in the fact that culture is the product of this innermost layer i.e. 'a set of assumptions and deep-level values concerning relationships among humans and between humans and their environment, shared by an identifiable group of people' (Kluckhohn Strodtbeck 1961, Maznevski and Destafano 1995, Smith and Peterson 1995). It is a lack of adherence to, or acceptance of, the barriers raised by making incorrect assumptions during cross-cultural working that can lead to dissatisfaction within the work group and result in dysfunctional teams. However, the dynamism of this type of exercise within the process of Multi-cultural collaboration has been shown to force an immediate awareness of different viewpoints that would otherwise remain unrecognised without externalisation (Maznevski and Peterson 1997) and result in improved integration and understanding. In becoming aware of these differing viewpoints, the participants were able to understand the difficulties that could arise during the JV, thus ensuring that these differences could be recognised and taken into account during day-to-day interactions.

### **'Force Field' analysis**

Humans will always have different viewpoints with regard to the most efficient and effective ways of working. In team working it is important to externalise and share these different perspectives, which generally manifest themselves in the form of individual concerns, in

order for them to be recognised and, ultimately, alleviated. In the context of this workshop ‘Force field’ analysis was utilised to achieve this.

Each individual was provided with a sheet of paper on which they were asked to write their main concern for the IDA joint venture. Once written, the responses, which were entirely anonymous, were screwed up and thrown into a large bin (This gesture was as much symbolic of the throwing out of any concerns as it was a part of the proceedings). The participants then divided into six teams, with each team taking four pieces of paper from the bin at random.

Main concern is...	AMEC procedures will inhibit CUH2A creativity
Ideas	Agree on new set of procedures
	Utilise best of each companies procedures for JV
	Generate set of procedures with client in mind
	Allow IDA to operate different procedures internally
	Ensure those outside of JV recognise that different procedures can be operated
	Eliminate any hidden agendas which may exist

**Table 2** Example of a concern and ideas to address it

If a concern had originated from one of that team it was returned and another was chosen. Once all concerns had been allocated, each team was asked to discuss its four issues and brainstorm ideas for allaying them (See table 2 for example).

After completing this for all concerns the teams were asked to develop two themes from their four issues and generate a list of the perceived positive and negative aspects of each. These positives and negatives were then mapped onto force field diagrams (an example of which is shown in figure 2).

The issues raised illustrate the connection between the implicit cultures (described in figure 2) of the two collaborating organisations and the different stages of organisation growth and development at which they function. CUH2A, being relatively young in terms of organisational growth, perceived themselves as being highly entrepreneurial and enterprising. The organisational culture, which is a direct result of the firm’s size and early stage of growth, is one that does not require or, as a direct result of this, recognise administrative procedure. Conversely, AMEC, a company which is entering its second cycle of entrepreneurial growth after a period of consolidation, is a large organisation comprising many productive and physical resources that have developed as a result of corporate growth. The administrative structure of the firm, which has developed over time in response to immediate needs to manage and organise an increasing resource base, binds the resources together in rational framework, without which the firm could not function efficiently.

The fact that the firms are enterprising enough to have formed a strategic alliance in a bid to achieve the shared ambition of making a profit illustrates that they are capable of growing. However, any future growth of CUH2A will demand the development of organisational and administrative structure, irrespective of whether it is developed haphazardly in response to immediate needs or is shaped consciously, in order to improve efficiency (Penrose 1995) and manageability. In this respect, the relatively young firm will have to show many of the same characteristics of the mature firm in order to grow successfully. However, until recognised through the use of ‘force field analysis’, this cultural diversity, which was merely the result of the differences in the growth cycles of the firms, manifested itself in the form of a major concern for the alliance.



**Figure 2** Force field diagram of balance between bureaucracy Vs creativity

The exercise in general allowed all participants to recognise and share the primary concerns of all those involved in the JV and take initial steps toward addressing those issues. The development of the force field diagrams allowed the teams to allay these concerns by externalising the issues applicable to each concern, thus using recognition of the cons, as well as the pros, in a positive way. Additionally, this served to promote and further enhance the common understanding within the group.

#### **'Prisoners Dilemma' type game**

The start of day two saw the introduction of the final, and what the participants considered to be the most rewarding, exercise of the workshop. It involved the playing of a 'prisoners dilemma' type game. The delegates were divided into two teams, with each team being given six blue cards, six red cards, and a joker. Six rounds were played in which each team played a single card. The points awarded to each team were dependent on the combination of cards played at each round. The decision of which card to play was made by handing the appropriate card to a referee at the end of each ten-minute round. The teams were permitted to meet and negotiate which card to play at the outset of each round. However, negotiation was outlawed until after the first round had been played. The aim of the game was not to beat the opposing sides score, but for both teams to score as many points as possible.

During the opening round each team decided to trust the other and play a red card first; a combination that meant that both teams scored +1. This allowed the teams to convene and generate a common strategy during the first negotiation period. During a brief negotiation period the participants agreed to utilise a shared win-win strategy, after which they returned to their respective teams to await the start of the second round. However, just prior to the deadline for the playing of the second card one of the teams decided to renege on the

agreement. The reason for this was simple. One individual, who had isolated himself from the teams discussions, had developed a strategy that would allow the teams to reach the maximum possible achievable scores. In the short time that was left before the card was to be played the team decided that the revised strategy should be applied, which involved playing a different card to that which had been agreed, before informing the other team in the second negotiation session.

Unfortunately, upon being advised of the outcome of the first round, the aggrieved team, believing that their counterparts had acted aggressively, decided that they would gain retribution. This resulted in a refusal to negotiate with the aggressors, which in turn meant that the original strategy could not be employed. Ultimately, the miss understanding of one team's intentions and the ensuing lack of trust resulted in both teams ending the game with negative scores. However, the team who had not changed strategy contented themselves by managing to score less negatively than their counterparts. It was only after the game had ended that explanations could be provided.

The aim of this objective, which was met very effectively, was to simulate the effect of misinterpreted actions, while showing how these can be propagated if communication is lost. In a mono-cultural team there should be little, if any, difficulty in understanding the meaning of a statement. However, in a cross-cultural context, where different perceptions and values are applied in stating and interpreting messages, serious problems can arise as 'an inaccurate interpretation of the real meaning of an action or utterance can cause damaging misunderstandings' (Mead 1990). This owes much to the fact that culture itself is intangible. Yet it is the underlying basis of tangible actions, behaviours and activities which, if no common understanding of cultural difference is held between members of the team, can be misconstrued by others as being argumentative, aggressive or even insulting.

It is imperative that members of a working unit communicate with one another if they are to work together effectively. A team can only reach a common understanding if they communicate and understand one another's perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and values. This sharing enables individuals to become aware of the abilities and needs of the unit in terms of both culture and personality. By communicating, members of the team can (Mead 1990):

- Exchange experiences
- Recognise common instincts
- Agree on immediate aims
- Negotiate strategies aimed at achieving these aims
- Implement and monitor these strategies

The outcome of this exercise reiterated some of the issues that had been raised by the first exercise; most notably that it is important to have a common understanding within a new environment. Additionally, several other key issues became apparent:

- The meaning of actions can easily be misconstrued.
- The misinterpretation of an action can result in the raising of barriers that will inhibit effective teamwork.
- It is very difficult to rebuild trust between individuals.
- A lack of trust can lead to a lose-lose situation during collaborative working.
- It is important to focus on achieving shared goals, rather than individual objectives.

### **Conclusions:**

Although the outcomes of cross-cultural group working can be both creative and beneficial, poor organisation of work groups can lead to the benefits being left unrealised or the

outcomes being 'destructively conflicted' (Barnard 1995). In fact, lack of preparation of multi-national teams can introduce challenges to effective group interaction that can on occasion outweigh their potential advantages.

As became apparent during the course of the final exercise, the actions of one group can be entirely misunderstood by the another. This suggests that if priorities of importance and relevance are not made explicit and shared among team members from the outset, there is a danger that messages will be both ambiguous when sent and misinterpreted once received (Mead 1990). As such, poor organisation of cross-cultural team working will increase the likelihood of misinterpretation and as a result, vitiate the effectiveness of the team.

It has been estimated that the failure of approximately 75% of cross-border JVs, mergers and acquisitions can be attributed to cultural incompatibility (Barnard 1995). However, it is easy for those involved in these alliances to attribute all difficulties to culture when many may have nothing to do with it, being more the result of poor interdisciplinary working. This paper has described the organisation and facilitation of a training event in the form of a workshop at which counterparts met and shared what they themselves described as being an enjoyable and highly rewarding experience. This event not only promoted team spirit within the group, but also improved the participants understanding of the cultural differences that existed between them. However, owing to the infancy of the JV it is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions with regard to the cultural differences that may exist between organisations, disciplines and even individuals in everyday practice. Although these are without doubt relevant issues, they are worthy of far greater discussion than can be afforded in this paper. As such, a second event has now been scheduled at which these same participants will take part in a 'Designing together' workshop (see Austin *et al* 1999, Steele, Macmillan, Austin, Kirby, Spence 1999). This will allow the members of the JV to both reacquaint themselves with one another and move toward developing improved interdisciplinary team working skills while remaining sympathetic to the inherent cultural differences embedded within the alliance. This event should provide the authors opportunity to not only assess the effects of cross-cultural working in practice, but also to identify the effects of everyday diversity, such as discipline, skill level, and education, and assess the respective impact of each on collaborative design activity.

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