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Bridging the Gap between International Business Cultures

Teams composed of international and Dutch managers or directors need to bridge their business cultural gaps as soon as possible in order to become more effective. It is a matter of leadership and having the right tools.

What is an international team?

Let us have a look at the composition of a management or board team. When the Board (of the mother company), the CEO, or one of the members of the team has a foreign nationality, we consider the team to be international, no matter how many members are Dutch.

Even when the team is composed of only Dutch members, but its main focus is on foreign markets or connected to international networks, we consider it to be an international team.

The reason is differences in business culture. Denying its international character or not being able to deal effectively with its differences in business culture is the number one cause of team frustration, ineffectiveness and failure. But it need not be that way.

What makes international teams different?

A business culture is the way a group of people is used to earn a living or to do business together. In any country you may find a multitude of business cultures at local and regional level, in economic and professional sectors, even in individual companies and organizations.

The fact is that, internationally, these differences increase by a thousand fold and will have a substantial effect on cross-border relationships, communication and collaboration. When members realize they participate in an international team they will be more aware of this fact.

The beauty of international teams is their potential for high performance. Due to the increased diversity, these teams are capable of better problem analysis, faster and more creative problem solving and greater contribution to the bottom line. Usually, their increased learning capacity is a major driver of their success. However, there is one condition: their potential needs to be managed well.

How do you manage international teams?

To help our clients to manage their international teams, we have developed a simple but effective model based on scientific research combined with our own international experience.



International Business Coaches



The model consists of a four-step process, ranging from perception and connection to appreciation and integration. Keep in mind that it is focused on the cultural aspects not on the technical aspects of team management. We will briefly go through these four steps.

Step 1 Perception

It all starts with raising awareness of your own and simultaneously of your team members' business cultures. Through observation we need to learn to perceive commonalities and differences in the way people create plans, manage meetings, take decisions, collaborate on implementation and give feedback. We also need to be able to differentiate between personal competencies and cultural issues. When you are good at math and I am good at languages, it is a matter of talent not culture.

Step 2 Connection

Based on our awareness of the commonalities and differences between our own and other business cultures, we need to build productive relationships with other people at work. Trust is the cornerstone of any relationship. It is gained by respect for other people's competencies and culture. Focusing on commonalities in stead of differences will help us gain respect much faster and easier.

Step 3 Appreciation

Values and norms are the basis of any business culture. Awareness of them is not enough, we need to learn to appreciate them, even when they are opposed to our own. Can we appreciate long term and short term targets, individual and collective performance, general and detailed ways of planning, direct and indirect ways of giving feedback?

Appreciation is essential for the next step.

Step 4 Integration

The goal of this whole process is a) to build bridges between the different business cultures within our team and b) to create a new common team culture based on the commonalities. Each team member has one foot on common team ground and the other foot remains in his or her own culture, so to speak.

When team managers require leadership

It is obvious that this four-step process will take time and stamina. Team managers may have technical knowledge of the four steps, but guiding their team through the ups and downs of this whole process for a couple of years requires leadership.

Building bridges between different business cultures and creating common ground belongs to the essence of leadership. It is an essential part of aligning a group of people to achieve a common goal.

When team managers permanently improve their leadership skills, it is our experience that teams can become highly effective and successful. It is also our experience that individual and team coaching speeds up the four-step process significantly and that it can be a valuable tool to improve leadership skills.