

Inter-cultural Competence

Case Study 3 – Meeting Behaviours

Background Information

Gert Fransen, an experienced technician from a leading Dutch water utility just arrived for the first time at his WOP counterpart utility host country. Being abroad for the first time in his professional life, Gert wants to quickly get the activities of the WOP started. Therefore, he organizes a meeting with in his opinion relevant counterparts.

At the time of the meeting, only few invitees showed up on time. During the meeting, many participants are either taking phone calls or working on their computer. The meeting is continuously interrupted due to late arrivals and people leaving the room to get some coffee.

At the end of the meeting, Gert feels frustrated due to the poor participation and endless discussions around in-his-opinion non-relevant items. Nothing what he had on his list has been resolved. Even worse, more items have been added to his list.

Challenge

The meeting has been a disaster in terms of participation and expected outcome. What can Gert do differently in order to avoid a similar situation in the next meeting?

BEST PRACTICES

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Potential Steps

- Create protocols and establish norms at the beginning of your meetings.
- Be clear about what you expect and how meetings will run. This gives certain people the freedom to move outside their comfort zone, and it also gives you the freedom to rein in others.
- You need to demonstrate that you understand different cultural behaviour but also explain why you think it's critical for people to show up to meetings on time and that people [who are late] will suffer the consequences.
- You need to know the people on your team and figure out the extent to which culture is an issue for each individual. Say, for instance, one of your team members comes from a hierarchical culture and is loath to provide feedback to a senior colleague. If you would like him to speak up in a meeting, you need to talk with him beforehand and strategize with him on how he can adapt his behaviour. Alternatively, you need to forgive him for not doing it.
- Focus too on forging bonds and fostering trust with your team members. Invest time upfront on building emotional bonds so that people on your team have opportunities to get to know you by sharing meals or talking over drinks.
- When it comes to professional meetings, one of the biggest cultural differences is the degree to which open debate and disagreement are viewed as a positive. In countries like Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand, saying: 'I disagree,' is seen as very aggressive and could lead to a break in the relationship, whereas in France and Russia, it's seen as a great opportunity to build a relationship. While individual adjustments like softening your language can be effective, it's also worth trying to make your team more comfortable with conflict. Before the meeting, you ask your team members to email their ideas and thoughts to a central organizing body that will be grouped by theme and shared once everyone is together. That way you're disagreeing with an idea, not a colleague. It's not personal.
- Study up on the variations that exist among cultures and how those differences play out in the workplace
- Incentivize colleagues to step outside their cultural comfort zones by institutionalizing rewards around what you're trying to motivate people to do

More ideas: <https://hbr.org/2015/12/how-to-run-a-meeting-of-people-from-different-cultures>