

# Rushing the Team Process Creates Cultural Clashes

The challenges of cross-cultural teamwork erupted two years ago in a clash among participants in a computer chip project that brought together IBM, Siemens AG of Germany, and Toshiba Corp. The three competing companies embarked on a revolutionary venture that ended as a case study for management consultants and team experts.

Despite incredible talent and experience, varying work habits impeded the joint research. While the groups shared a common software culture, they differed dramatically in all the procedures and practices that surround a group project: conducting meetings, allocating work space, offering suggestions, making decisions, resolving conflict, and even socializing together.

Cynthia Livingston of Boston, MA, President of the Organization of Women in International Trade, cites this joint venture to demonstrate the importance of team-building, understanding cultural differences, and respecting differing approaches to work. In her own consulting firm, Cambio International, Ms. Livingston helps businesses look at the human side of teamwork: how people bridge their cultural differences in team settings.

Pay attention to process, Livingston emphasizes. If you don't recognize

upfront that you're dealing with differences, you'll miss the creative potential your team offers ... and increase the conflict. Livingston recommends specific steps to develop a multi-cultural team:

## **Formation**

Jointly decide on norms, approaches, and roles to be used in working together. Don't rush this critical stage. This is when you'll connect personally and figure out how to resolve problems.

## **Challenge clarification**

Examine the practical things first so every one clearly understands how the work will get done. "What can we do to ensure each member's view is considered?" "How can we use input from people outside the group?" At this point, you should clarify goals, issues and opportunities as well as potential obstacles. Clarification is a prerequisite for moving on.

## **Visioning**

If multi-cultural teamwork is a new experience, visioning will allow you to stretch your imaginations, challenge your assumptions, and free yourself to take risks. You should be exploring how you would define "success" in meeting common goals, what kind of team you



need to be, and how you can maximize the value of multi-cultural perspectives.

## **Assessment**

Here, the team compares the existing situation with their vision. Keep in mind that the learning process is as important as the results. Be careful — or rely on a facilitator — to keep you from compromising at this point and sacrificing your individual and unique insights.

## **Action planning**

Recalling the potential for conflict among varying cultures, you now develop a plan with specific action steps to implement your vision. Remind yourself about the norms and visions you've agreed upon, as well as the conflict management.

## **Outcome evaluation**

Learn from the failures, as well as the team's success. Elicit individual responses and respect preferences: some members may choose to speak while others may write their evaluations (Livingston has even seen drawings and parables).

For those willing to slow down for these added steps, Livingston promises improved quality in the process as well as the results. ■

