

BUILDING MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

By Michael D. Lee, MBA

Developing effective teams in today's workplace is difficult but when you add the complexity of people from diverse cultures, it becomes a challenge beyond the abilities of most managers. So what's the big deal with diversity and teamwork? If you add to the mix many differences such as communications style, team concept, language and more you can see the potential problems.

Before starting to build a team composed of people from diverse cultures it's crucial to develop an atmosphere of openness around the issues of differences. In addition to the usual personality style surveys there should also be a communications style survey. Studies show that culture can impact learning style...

Team concept is an issue that should be discussed. Many collectivist cultures are historically very team-oriented such as Asians and Hispanics. Some cultures are more independent such as Americans and African Americans.

With team-oriented cultures it's vital that team incentives be developed and used to motivate them. Individual incentives such as preferred parking spaces, plaques and monetary rewards can actually divide a collectivist group. Develop team awards such as a group party or night out or trip.

Language can be another challenge. Just because everyone in your company speaks English doesn't necessarily mean they are all talking the same language. Common concepts, vocabulary and other terms should be defined and agreed-upon. Issues around those who speak different languages should also be surfaced.

Other cultural issues that could prevent the formation of an effective team include:

- personal space
- eye contact
- work ethic

Remember that culture can have a profound impact on the formation of teams. Consult an appropriate professional if this appears to be the case.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael D. Lee, MBA, has been one of the highest-ranking minority university administrators in the country. From 2001 through 2004 was Dean of the School of Management at John F. Kennedy University and a diversity consultant to companies around the world including General Motors. Mr. Lee is the author of a series of books on selling to multicultural customers. He speaks internationally on multicultural marketing and is the first Asian American to earn the Certified Speaking Professional designation in the history of the National Speakers Association. Michael can be reached by e-mail at: Michael@EthnoConnect.com.

