

Multinational Team

By Fiona Fowler

Cultural Communication Differences

The communication styles of Kenji, from Japan, and Radhika, from India, can be best understood through the lens of high-context vs. low-context communication and collectivist vs. individualist cultures. Kenji and Radhika come from high context, collectivist cultures. In high context cultures, much of the communication relies on non-verbal cues, implied meaning, and situational understanding. This battles low context cultures like in the United States and Germany, where individuals value explicit, direct verbal communication. Similarly, collectivist cultures—common in both Japan and India—emphasize group harmony, respect for hierarchy, and indirect expression, especially in public or formal settings. Kenji's reluctance to speak openly shows cultural respect for hierarchy and seniority, while Radhika's reserved behavior shows a preference for maintaining group harmony and avoiding confrontation in public. These cultural norms can easily be misinterpreted in a low context, individualistic workplace. Maria and the team might wrongly perceive Kenji's and Radhika's silence as disengagement or lack of ideas, when in fact, they are showing respect and practicing cultural values around modesty and group cohesion.

Analysis of Team Dynamics

If these cultural assumptions remain unaddressed, they can significantly affect team morale, collaboration, and harmony in the workplace. People in the workspace who operate under low context expectations may see Kenji and Radhika as passive, uncommitted, and perhaps even rude, potentially marginalizing their contributions and causing them to withdraw even more.

Misunderstandings may also arise. For example, if Kenji avoids giving direct criticism, teammates may assume he agrees with a proposal, only to find out later that he had concerns he didn't voice. Similarly, Radhika's preference for private disagreement might be seen as evasiveness rather than a culturally appropriate response. Unacknowledged differences can lead to feelings of frustration, exclusion, and lower trust within the team. This, in turn, can hurt the overall effectiveness and innovation potential of the group.

Inclusive Communication Strategies

To foster inclusive communication, Maria can adopt several strategies. She can create multiple channels for input and encourage written feedback or one-on-one follow-ups after meetings to give space for those less comfortable speaking in public. As well as establish turn-taking in discussions. This helps avoid interruptions and gives everyone an equal opportunity to contribute. Cultural awareness training may help too. It will equip the team with an understanding of different cultural norms and communication styles to reduce bias and misinterpretation. Private check-ins can be incorporated as well to allow for a more intimate feel, Maria can periodically check in with Kenji and Radhika individually to gather input and build trust.

Team members can also make adjustments by practicing active listening and paying attention to nonverbal cues, avoiding assumptions based on silence or indirect communication and using inclusive language that invites diverse perspectives. By adopting these inclusive strategies, the team can tap into the diverse strengths of its members more effectively.

Reflection on Personal and Professional Growth

Understanding intercultural dynamics significantly influences how I approach teamwork and leadership. I now recognize that communication styles are deeply rooted in cultural values, upbringing, and interpreting behaviors through only one cultural lens can lead to misunderstandings. Personally, I can enhance intercultural communication by staying curious, asking open-ended questions, making the effort, and making space for different perspectives. Professionally, I plan to develop skills in cultural intelligence and empathetic leadership—skills that are essential in today’s global workplace.

Reflection Questions

- **What surprised you most about intercultural communication challenges?**

I was most surprised by how easily silence or indirect communication can be misread as disinterest or lack of competence when it may actually be a form of cultural respect.

- **How comfortable are you navigating intercultural differences, and what skills would you like to develop further?**

I’m becoming more comfortable just by surrounding myself with different types of classmates constantly, but I want to improve my ability to read nonverbal cues across cultures and learn more about creating psychologically safe environments where everyone feels heard.