Multicultural individuals can act as ‘cultural brokers’ to boost the creative performance of diverse teams

The presence of multicultural members within diverse teams significantly enhances the overall teams’ creative performance, according to new research by business school INSEAD.

Cultural diversity in business provides many advantages, allowing organisations and teams to benefit from multiple perspectives, knowledge and ideas. However, differing cultural norms and beliefs can also lead to misunderstanding or conflict, standing in the way of effective collaboration.

A new research article, recently published in *Organisation Science*, finds that individuals who have a multicultural background can play a pivotal role in diverse teams by acting as ‘cultural brokers’, whereby their more nuanced understanding of culture means they can facilitate interactions between individuals across cultural boundaries, within diverse teams.

**Sujin Jang, INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour**, is one of the authors of the research article. Professor Sujin Jang has been listed on the Thinkers50 Radar List in 2018 and recognised as one of the management thinkers most likely to shape the future of how organisations are managed and led. Thinkers50 is the world’s premier ranking of global business thinkers and the Thinkers50 Radar List recognises the talent of up-and-coming management gurus.

Taking archival data from a global business student competition, Professor Jang analysed data from 2,117 teams over five years, with participants from more than 40 countries, who had eight weeks to come up with a business plan proposing the “next big idea” for a company of their choice. The data showed that within diverse teams, the presence of multicultural members significantly enhanced the teams’ creative performance.
Surprisingly, multicultural members enhanced the creative performance of the team irrespective of whether they shared the same cultural background with other team members. ‘Cultural outsiders’, who shared no common background with the rest of the team, were just as effective as ‘cultural insiders’, who shared a cultural background with one or more other members, at facilitating greater creativity in their team. In short, teams with one or more multicultural members, regardless of whether those multiculturals were cultural insiders or outsiders, were found to outperform teams devoid of multicultural individuals.

Professor Jang said: “These results show how multiculturals can enable teams to capitalise on the strengths of cultural diversity to generate creative outcomes, while avoiding the pitfalls associated with cross-cultural collaboration.”

**Two types of cultural brokerage: integrating vs. eliciting**

A second experimental study was constructed to assess the actual processes involved in cultural brokerage. In this experiment, 83 teams, comprised of two monoculture members and one multicultural individual – either a cultural insider or outsider – were asked to propose creative ideas for a multicultural wedding involving a special ritual, musical performance and food dish that incorporated elements of two different cultures.

Results showed that cultural insiders and outsiders enact cultural brokerage in different ways. Cultural insiders primarily brokered by integrating ideas from different cultures, directly combining or synthesising ideas from varying perspectives into a novel whole. Meanwhile, cultural outsiders tended to broker by eliciting ideas from different cultures, drawing out cultural information, ideas or knowledge by asking pertinent questions.

Both types of cultural brokerage enhanced creative performance of the team as a whole. In fact, integrating and eliciting jointly explained 28 percent of the variance in team creative performance.

**The implications for organisations**

While every company has a different cultural context, the research suggests that all firms stand to gain by leveraging the diverse knowledge and perspectives of their increasingly multicultural teams.

“Organisations would do well to think about the conditions they could put in place to facilitate cultural brokerage”, says Professor Jang. “For example, it may be helpful to give recognition to potential cultural brokers or provide opportunities for them to enact this role, as they are not always the most senior person in their team.”

“It is also important to keep in mind that cultural outsiders, multicultural individuals who have no overlap with the cultures of other individuals in a team, can be effective
cultural brokers. These individuals are often overlooked, because we tend to assume that one needs to have knowledge of the specific cultures represented in a team to engage in cultural brokerage. However, the findings of this research highlight the important role that cultural outsiders can play in enhancing team creativity.”

Find article at