

NAVIGATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES – EXCERPTED FROM OUR NEW UPCOMING TIPS GUIDE: LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

#1

When planning same-time virtual meetings, consider how cultural and language differences might affect the design of the agenda and needed time. If using English as the common language, many non-native English speakers will need time to translate in and out of their native language. (This is true for any people who speak a native language other than the shared language of the team.) Plan to allow a moment or two for all participants to pause before responding to a question or making a statement, so that everyone has a chance to collect their thoughts. Plan to allow about 50% more time for a group discussion when people speak different native languages.

#2

Pause, reflect and paraphrase. As the team leader, you will need to develop a knack for quick and succinct paraphrasing. Don't expect people to admit that they're lost or don't understand a point. Be proactive about rewording an important point and validate the intended meaning, rather than wonder how many people may have missed out on a key concept.

#3

Learn enough about the different cultures represented by your team so you can apply the most effective tactics for engaging all participants without fear of embarrassment or resentment. In some cultures, for example, calling on someone by name may be awkward or humiliating. Design your team meeting to encourage easy participation by everyone without calling anyone out. For example, you might go around the virtual table and ask each person for the one aspect of X that each likes the best and the one aspect that s/he considers most concerning.

#4

People from certain cultures may feel awkward about stating dissenting opinions or offering any type of criticism in an open forum. (This is also true of certain personality types, or certain organizations where hierarchy is especially prized.) Consider multiple ways people can participate safely. For example, you might employ a virtual collaboration tool that allows for anonymous contributions, both synchronously or asynchronously. Or you may frame a question to allow someone to voice concern without fearing that s/he is being perceived as critical. For example: “If you could change one thing about our new system, what would it be?”

#5

Many people are more comfortable using a second language by speaking and others feel more competent when writing. Offer team members at least two ways to communicate. In addition to phone, provide a tool by which they can provide written responses or ideas, either during the meeting, or in advance—preferably both.

#6

When setting up team meeting times, consider time zone differences carefully. Even if 9 AM Eastern time is the most convenient time for most people, rotate meeting times so that everyone has a chance to experience the inconvenience of meeting during odd hours. For certain teams, setting up two different meetings at different days/times can also work well, if it’s viable for the team leader, who usually bears the brunt of running an additional meeting.

#7

Delivering performance feedback remotely can be tough enough for any team, but when different cultures are represented, the team

leader must take the time to understand how feedback might be best relayed for different cultures. For example, people of some cultures (notably, the U.S.) typically expect to hear their manager deliver positive feedback before offering up any criticism. People of other cultures, however, might be taken aback by a leader who starts out with what's working, since they take it for granted that everything is working well, unless they hear otherwise. Whenever possible, use a videocam or another means of allowing each of you to see each other's faces and register expressions. Otherwise, the absence of visual cues, coupled with cultural differences, can present overwhelming complexities, especially if the feedback is not especially good.

#8

More to come in our new tips guide – coming soon!