

## **Working In Contemporary Teams**

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### Cross-cultural teams

Welcome back to this course on working contemporary teams and virtual teams. I am your co-instructor, Dr. M.P. Ganesh from IIT Hyderabad. We have already seen concepts related to what is contemporary team and also specific element in contemporary team which is virtual team.

So now we are going to talk about cross-cultural teams and startup teams. So this is going to be the outline of this particular chapter. We will talk about what do we mean by cross-cultural teams. What are its challenges and how do we manage the differences.

And also the second part of this particular chapter, I will talk about startup teams and what is the uniqueness of startup teams and also what are the strategies we can adapt to work in startup teams in a more effective manner. So after opening up of the economy, many multinational organizations have started their functioning in India and also globalization has led to people moving to different cultures. Initially during 1990s or 2000s working in cross-cultural teams was a very difficult phenomenon. But now more and more cross-cultural exchanges have been happening physically and also through media. We watch a lot of foreign media channels.

We watch a lot of serials and television programs from different countries, not just from America. We watch from Korea. We watch television series from UK, France and things like that. So even though there is a lot of familiarity with other cultures which has increased nowadays, to what extent they will help us in working effectively in a cross-cultural team is a question mark. Many of these assumptions we get from the media channels, either from television or movies are not completely true.

In fact, many of them can be very stereotypical. We may think this is what the reality is, but there are many other subtler differences which these television series or movies cannot communicate. Having said that, what can we do to increase our familiarity with

other cultures? So the only way we can do it is interacting with others and also understanding what are the factors which we should be careful when we interact with people of different cultures. So you either learn from your own experience of interacting in a multicultural context, interacting with people from different cultural contexts and also you learn through some of these techniques which you can use while you are interacting with people of different cultures. So you can either learn from your own experience or you can learn and or learn from some of these literatures or lectures.

So if you see this slide, a simple thing like greeting a person of another culture is not as simple as we think because in different cultures people greet people differently. In some cultures they shake hands, in some cultures they hug, in some cultures they will be very formal, in some cultures they will be very informal and casual. You call the other person with first name but in some places it is expected out of you to call someone with the surname or with a title. So a simple thing like greeting someone itself can be a challenge in a multicultural context. So what do we mean by culture? Because the word culture has different meanings depending on where we use it.

We talk about culture from an organizational point of view. We talk about culture in terms of cultural norms, we talk about culture in terms of certain belief system. So the idea of culture is understood differently in different disciplines, in academic disciplines. For example in sociology they talk about culture in a certain way, in psychology they talk about culture in a certain way, in organizational behavior culture is defined in a certain way. So for other understanding I am going to talk about culture from a more general holistic point of view.

So what is culture? Culture is the way of thinking, behaving and believing that members of a social unit have in common. So if there is a social unit it can be a region, it can be a country, it can be a continent. So any social unit, the assumption is people of that social unit have similar ways of thinking, behaving and believing. So there must be some similarity among members of a social unit. So that similarity emerges from the idea of culture.

So what causes this similarity? The similarity is caused by a similarity of culture. So culture is the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge which constitute the shared basis of social action. So what does culture constitute of? When you say culture, what are the components of culture? So it involves inherited ideas, you get it from your social group, you inherit as a member of a social group, you get it from your, you learn it from your social group. The kind of ideas, what you believe as right and wrong, what you consider as important, what you believe as true, all these things are component of a culture and all these things we acquire from the social group which we belong to. And

that shared beliefs and ideas and values influence the way we behave.

So our behavior is influenced by ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge and all these things are acquired through the influence of our social group. For example, if you are an Indian, so many Indians, they believe in a certain idea. For example, they believe in saving money for long term. They believe in family as something which is very, very important for them. They believe in certain assumptions about what is successful life.

So these beliefs are common among most Indians. Again, I don't want to generalize, but in a very general way, in a very majority kind of outlook, many people more or less believe in these same ideas. There might be some differences, but largely some of these belief systems are more or less common among Indians. And how do Indians acquire these kind of belief systems? It is because of the social interaction. It is because of the way they have the upbringing and things like that.

There might be individual differences also. For example, when I say India as a culture, India have different states, people of different religions, so they might have their own belief systems, own ideas of their own social group. But even then, there are few cultural aspects which are similar in the larger context of India as a country. Also, if you take Asia, Asians are different from Americans or Asians are different from Europeans in a certain way. And Asians are similar to another Asian compared to an Asian similar to another European.

So why this similarity happens? It happens because of the cultural values. Again, there can be alternate theories which may contradict with this viewpoint, but we go with the assumption that culture is something which is similar among one social group. It can be a nation, a religion, a state, or a particular social group. So this is about the idea of culture. And how does culture influence individuals? So culture is something which is created in the group, larger group.

And how does it affect an individual member? Like I said earlier, all these beliefs we have, ideas we have, knowledge we have as individuals, they are strongly influenced by which social group we belong to. Culture affects our conscious and unconscious level of mind. So at a very conscious level, which means you know that I'm behaving like this because I belong to this group. Sometimes even without knowing why it is happening, our past beliefs or the way we are trained or shaped by the social group, it will influence our behavior. So either you know it or even without knowing, you are influenced by the larger cultural values and also certain behaviors like dreams, certain behaviors which you don't have control over.

All these behaviors can also be strongly influenced by culture. So these behaviors or thought processes are called unconscious thought processes. So those can also be influenced by culture. And also culture influences our value system. What we consider to be important is shaped by the larger social group.

For example, like I said, long-term orientation. Indians or even Asians, people of Eastern culture, they have a tendency to save for future. So they may not splurge on short-term benefits. So splurging on short-term benefits are seen as Western values. Again, it can be stereotypical, but largely this is how it is.

So let's say if you have your salary every month, we have the tendency to buy property, we have the tendency to buy land, we have the property to buy jewelry, we have the tendency to save money in bank. Okay. You value long-term, you save money for long-term instead of gratifying your immediate needs. So this is kind of a value system. And how did we get this value system? We got this value system through our social group.

So cultural influences our social values, our values, and also how we see things. And culture is learned and reinforced by people around us. So how do we get this cultural values from people around us? So let's say if someone belongs to different cultures, for example, I grew up in India for 30 years, and then I went and settled in US for next 10 years. So which cultural value will be predominant? Probably, initially I will have this problem of adapting to a new culture. So I might have these cognitive dissonance.

I might have these questions of which value should I stick to. I may have confusions in terms of what will suit me. I will have problems in terms of overcoming the way my perception is shaped by earlier culture, and it may create certain adjustment problems in the new culture. So these are some of the problems when people get into or live in different cultures for long periods of time. For example, there is this concept called expatriate adjustment, which means expatriates means people from one culture work in another culture for long periods who settle in another culture for long periods.

So how do they adapt to a new culture? Similarly, in a work team context also, working in a cross-cultural context, the team has people of different cultural values, cultural orientation, belief systems, working there can be a major challenge because you have to collaborate with them. So some of the things you see from the other people in the group, you might be finding it difficult to understand or even accept. So that may create conflict. So like I said, different kinds of culture. Culture can be at a national level, regional level.

For example, in India, Indians are similar in certain aspects, but that doesn't mean that

all Indians are same. There can be like regional differences. Like for example, people of Tamil Nadu might be different from people of Calcutta or Haryana or Punjab. People from Sikkim might be very different from people of Gujarat in terms of their cultural belief systems, in terms of what they eat, what kind of festivals they celebrate, what kind of traditions they follow. So all those things might be very different even within the same country like India.

It can also be at the organizational level, which means every organization has a certain common belief system. For example, a company like Google, they may have a certain work culture, vis-a-vis a company like Amazon. A Japanese company like Suzuki might have a certain culture compared to a Korean company like Samsung. Or even within the same country, different organizations might have different culture depending on the founders belief system, depending on the leaderships initiative and things like that. So culture can be at a national, regional level.

Culture can be at the organizational level. Culture can also be at the professional level. For example, researchers, if you are an academician and academic researchers, wherever you go, you can be an Indian, you can be a US academician and researcher, you can be an African researcher, all researchers will have similar values. Similarly, doctors, doctors throughout the world will have certain kind of professional culture. We call them professional values, which are reinforced by the social group.

So there is this term called norm, I want you to understand. Norm means unwritten rules. So the social group reinforces these cultural values through unwritten rules. There are no written rules. For example, how to be an Indian or if you are visiting a new country, American, what are the do's and don'ts in terms of cultural values in America? You may not know.

You know, it is not written down. It is something which is unwritten and passed through word of mouth. Through socialization. So there is no clear cut written down template to say this is what is Indian culture or this is what is Japanese culture or this is what is Gujarati culture and things like that. So these are like unwritten things.

So these unwritten rules are called norms. If they are written, they are called rules. So there is this sociologist called Hofstede. So he has developed certain dimensions after studying people of various different countries and cultures. So he looked at belief systems, cultural belief systems and values of various countries and social groups and he found out there are five dimensions which vary across one culture to another culture.

So the first dimension is power distance. So power distance means in certain cultures,

people respect authority and people fear authority and the society is divided into various power hierarchies. There is always be like, there will be someone at the top, there are some people at the bottom. There are like various levels and people at one level have to fear or respect people at the top level and people at top level, they have the authority to control people at the lower level. Simple example is in some countries, if you are a boss, if you are a subordinate, you won't call your boss by first name, you have to call them sir or you have to call them mister. But in some countries, irrespective of which level are they in the organization, you call them by their first name.

You don't have to like, you know, use sir or ma'am or surname. You don't have to use surname also, you can call them by first name. Okay. Similarly, let's say in some cultures, they fear authority, police people. If you think about police people in some countries, the citizens are supposed to fear the police, but in some cultures, police is not a profession which you have to be feared.

Police as a profession is to help, so this is the understanding. Okay. So this is like a continuum. Some cultures, there'll be high power distance, in some cultures, it is moderate power distance, in some cultures, there is a low power distance. Let's say if you are working in a team, some team members are belong to a culture which is high power distance, and you belong to a culture which has low power distance, and you will call them by first name, and they may think why this person is disrespecting me, or they may feel uncomfortable.

Or let's say you are from a high power distance culture, and you are calling someone, sir or ma'am, who's low power distance culture, they may feel awkward. Why this person is calling me sir, ma'am, and things like that. Maybe he is not friendly to me, he or she is not open to talk to me, and all those things might happen. The second dimension is uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance means cultures which are high in uncertainty avoidance, they always look for precision, they always look for predictability.

On the other hand, cultures which are low in uncertainty avoidance, or cultures which are okay with uncertainty, they tend to be, they are not, they are okay with confusion, they are okay with chaos. So one extreme, in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, people require predictability and less chaos. On the other hand, cultures where people are okay with uncertainty, they won't avoid uncertainty, they in fact, they are very happy working in a chaotic condition. A simple example could be cultures which value uncertainty avoidance, cultures which are not comfortable with uncertainty, they give a lot of importance to punctuality, they give a lot of importance to perfection in their jobs, they give a lot of importance to, everything should be in order, they expect everything to

be clearly written down. Deviation from the written rules or norms or rules manuals are not encouraged in those cultures.

So if somebody is late to a meeting, they will be looked down upon. So these are high uncertainty avoidance cultures. For example, countries like Germany, Japan, everything's very punctual, everything is like very precise. If somebody says I will meet you at 1 pm, they'll meet you at 1 pm, they won't come early, they won't come late, even one minute late, they won't come.

These are in some cultures, punctuality is not valued. For example, if they say we'll meet at 1 pm, people may, somebody will join at 12.30, somebody will join at 1.10, somebody will join at 2 o'clock. So those kind of uncertainty might happen. For example, if you look at our Indian streets, it's so, I don't call it chaotic, but so vibrant.

If you look at foreign countries like Germany or Switzerland or even Japan, everything is like roads are very precise, everybody follows a queue, there is always, everything is as if it's in its place. So these values are called uncertainty avoidance values. For example, in a team, what can happen is if you belong to high uncertainty avoidance culture, but somebody is like in the team who's low uncertainty avoidance and you tell them, okay, when should we finish the project? They say, okay, we finish it tomorrow, I'll give it back, I'll give the report by tomorrow, but they are not replying, they are giving you day after tomorrow. You feel very, very upset.

On the other hand, somebody says we'll meet at 1 pm. And you are there at 1 pm and the other person has not come till 1.5, you leave the place. And they will think, just five minutes late, why this person didn't wait for me? So the idea of just five minutes late may not be okay with people of high uncertainty avoidance cultures. So these differences might create problems in a team. The third dimension is individualism versus collectivism, which means in some cultures, individual rights are given more importance.

Decision making will always be made at the individual level. In cultures which have high collectivism, the group is given more importance. So especially decisions are made after discussing with the members of the social group. For example, in a country like India, we make decisions in consulting with our family, like our parents, our elders, or even our well-wishers, teachers, and things like that. So this also shows that there is a power distance.

We respect or we give more importance to people at a higher level. These are the cultures of low cultures, which are individualistic in nature. You are expected to make

your own decisions. If you ask someone, what do you think they'll think, why this person is not behaving like an adult? For example, in a country like US, if you are 18 years and above, you are expected to move out of your family. You cannot live with your parents. Living with your parents is seen as something which is very kiddish, immature.

But in India, even if you are 40, 50 years old, you have to take care of your parents. You have to live with your parents' family, especially if you are a son. So these are collectivistic kinds of cultures. Especially in a work context, in a team context, if you belong to an individualistic culture, you may think, if I have to take a decision, I'll take on my own move. Why should I consult with my team members? Vis-a-vis, if there is a member who belongs to a collectivistic culture, he may expect the other team member to consult, even if it is not directly related to him.

They may feel why this person is making all the decisions on his own. Maybe he's not a team player. Being a team player is considered to be consulting with all your team members, which may not be correct in a true individualistic kind of a culture. The fourth dimension is masculinity versus femininity. So, masculine cultures give more importance to achievement.

They give more importance to competence and aggressiveness. In femininity cultures, importance is given to concern for others. Importance is given for creating things which will nurture others. So creation, nurturance, listening to others, all those qualities are considered to be feministic kind of cultures. Masculine cultures, again, they focus on individualism, highly competitive, very achievement oriented, not relationship oriented.

Those aspects are called masculine oriented cultures. So, some cultures are very competition driven. Some cultures are more nurturance, creating a cordial environment kind of a cultures. The fifth dimension is long-term orientation. Long-term orientation means, like I said earlier, you think always about the future.

You are willing to forego your short-term happiness for long-term benefits. So, for example, some cultures people save for their children also, for their grandchildren. They may not spend now, they may not splurge now, but they will save for long-term benefit. These are in some cultures, people live in credit cards. So they will spend even without thinking about what will happen for our next meal.

So these are short-term orientation. So sustainability, culture of saving, all those things are long-term oriented cultures. So all these dimensions influence the way we behave in a social group, especially if the social group is very diverse in terms of cultures. For example, in a cross-cultural team, each one of them have different cultural orientation in



these dimensions. It may lead to many challenges like confusion, misunderstanding, miscommunication, conflict, and things like that. There is another aspect to culture, especially in a team context, in a work context is high and low context cultures.

So what do you mean by that? High context cultures, when people communicate, they give a lot of importance to the background information. In low context cultures, the importance is given to just exchanging information. They are like right to the point. They may not deviate from what they want to communicate. On the other hand, in high context cultures, they will talk about many things and then come to the point.

If you see in Eastern cultures, when you meet someone in a group meeting or in a work meeting, you are supposed to ask how are you, how is your family doing, which class are your children, all those things and then they will come to the point. Where did you go for vacation and all those things. In low context cultures, if you meet someone, you have to tell them what you want, what do you expect from them or what is the purpose of your communication. So this can also affect team behavior in a cross-cultural context. So if one person is from high context culture, he or she will be talking, talking, talking.

The other person is from low context culture, they will be like why are you beating the bush? Why are you not coming to the point? Vis-à-vis this low context person, she talks precisely what she wants. The other person who is from high context culture will think why this person is so shrewd, why this person is so unfriendly. Okay. So these kind of differences might happen. So these are countries which belong to low context culture, countries and cultures which are high context like Eastern countries are like China, Asia, Saudi Arabia, they are high context countries.

Countries like Germany, Australia are like very low context countries. So how do culture affect communication? Especially in a team context, communication between members become very important in the effectiveness of the team. So in what are the ways culture affects communication in team? So these are some of the ways culture affects communication in the team. We will talk about each one of them little more in detail. Vocabulary, the kind of words people choose in a communication might change according to culture.

So if you see, we may think the same word, it is the same word. How can people misunderstand the same word? Okay. For example, if I say a certain word, the word might be same in different cultures, but the meaning of it might be very, very different. So why these differences happen? The simple idea like yes, we talked about yes. What is the meaning of yes? Does it mean agreement? Does it mean I listen to you? Does it mean that I completely accept what you said? It varies.

Okay. In countries like Eastern context, yes means I am listening. In European context, yes means I agree. Okay. For example, in a team, somebody asked, this is what I feel.

Okay. Am I right? If you say yes, you mean you are agreeing to me. But you might be saying yes because you are saying like, yeah, I am listening. You know, I understand. Understanding is different from accepting.

So yes can mean I understand. In some cultures, yes might mean I accept in some cultures. Okay. So why it is happening? Because certain words, meaning or any word, there are two types of meaning.

Denotative means what it actually is understood, the outer layer. Okay. Dictionary meaning. Connotative means meaning which may vary across one culture to another culture in one context to another context, like I said, yes. So if you look at dictionary, what does yes mean? It may say agreement.

But in some cultures, yes means understand, I understand. Okay. So some cultures are very direct. They use very, very direct words. They may not use, you know, indirect words. For example, if they don't like something, they will say I don't like. In some cultures, they will say it is good, but you know, you may not directly say it is not good.

You know, if you ask for help in some cultures, if they cannot do, they will say, sorry, I cannot do. In some cultures, like Eastern cultures, they will not say I won't do.

They say, yeah, I mean, I will talk tomorrow. Okay. You come here tomorrow, I will see. Okay. So that I see, I will see is a very vague thing. It's not a direct thing. Okay. And also certain concepts are very culture specific.

For example, you know, the idea of, you know, arranged marriage, so-called arranged marriage. You know, in many cultures, like European countries and all, the idea of arranged marriage itself is not there. They mean a marriage. It means legally two people getting married.

Arranged marriage is true only in certain cultures. These are like culture specific concepts. Slangs. Slangs mean certain words which are specific to a certain culture. You know, for example, Jugaad, you know, in India, we use the word Jugaad. And also in some cultures, those words might be used as curse words, but in their context, it might be like friendly words.

Okay. Euphemism means how do you mention a social taboo word in a socially accepted way. For example, in Indian context, if somebody passed away, if somebody died, you tell them they have gone to heaven or gone to God. In some cultures, they will call their kick the bucket. Or if you want to use washroom, we will say I want to use restroom.

In some cultures, they will say I want to take a leak. Okay. So some words which are not directly, cannot be directly said, how people use other words or other forms of these words. Okay. So why does it matter? Because you may know English to work in a country which speaks English, or you may know Japanese language to work in Japanese. Just by learning Japanese language doesn't mean that you will, you know, you will be able to adjust well in the Japanese culture because many of these things might be untaught.

So that's why they are like social norms. You cannot really, you know, train them in all these things. Only when you go there and learn, you will learn through your experience. Okay. So I'll stop here. We'll meet in the next class.