Intercultural Competence – Key Competence

of Multicultural Teams

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Abstract: The article deals with intercultural competence of multicultural teams elaborating European projects. Firstly, it discusses basic theoretical aspects of the related concepts: culture and intercultural competence, then presents its impact on multicultural team effectiveness and models for improving it. **Prior Work:** The article finds ground on studies of intercultural competence as a set of strategic, personal, social and professional competences. **Approach:** The paper uses the project cycle management theory and proves that in multi-ethnic surroundings, the project members' communication skills might not be sufficient to generate mutual understanding. Provisionally, the study performed a standardized Internet survey on self-assessment of intercultural competence among 50 experts on European projects. Another applied approach is field observation (attendance and note-taking) of the 5- day training "To become diplomats between cultures", based on Bennett's theoretical model for "Development of Intercultural Sensitivity". **Results:** A training model for improving intercultural competence of multicultural team members. **Implications:** Possible approach for improvement of project management of cross-border or trans-border funding programs. **Value:** Building intercultural competence in European project management is important, timely and necessity-driven, especially under the framework of the Danube Region Strategy.

Keywords: intercultural competence; improving competence; multicultural teams.

JEL Classification: Z18 - Public Policy

1   Introduction

Multinational/multicultural teams are being set up by the EU cohesion policy, which encourages cross-border or trans-border development projects. During the project implementation period the members of these teams are working together under the specific programme framework, endeavouring to reach planned objectives, attain sustainable cross-border or trans-border partnerships and achieve long-term impact. Unlike communication in homogeneous teams, where the involved experts share one relatively similar culture, in multicultural ones it is among 'foreigners'. Residing in various geographical regions and speaking various languages, the team members communicate mostly virtually by using the language of the Subsidy contract, which might be the mother language of neither partner. This description correctly mirrors the implementation process of the Cross-border Programme Romania-Bulgaria, for example. Under such conditions, what is the key competence of such multicultural teams for successful project cycle management?

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The article attempts to prove the assumption that intercultural competence is the key comptence of multicultural teams. The proverb "the chain is as strong as its weakest link" might be a good start of discussing the implications of the lack of certain level of skills and understanding to deal with communication among 'foreigners'. The research questions to follow are: 'Is the effectiveness of such teams impacted by their competence to correctly convey project messages over cultures? Are team members aware that unavoidable cultural differences might decisively blur communication?

To answer these questions, the paper embarks on the basic theoretical aspects of two related concepts: culture and intercultural competence. It reviews a number of definitions of culture to present some important common characterics of these definitions, which lead to the notion of intercultural competence.

Then it presents widely accepted models of intercultural competence and focus on Deardorff's circular model, which illustrates "the acquisition of intercultural competence [as] a continual, dynamic process" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006,p.7)

The paper uses the project cycle management theory and proves that in multi-ethnic surroundings, the project members' communication skills might not be sufficient to generate mutual understanding. Provisionally, the study performed a standardized Internet survey on self-assessment of intercultural competence among 50 European project experts, based on which it proposes a model for building intercultural competence.

2. General Outline

2.1 Definitions of Culture

Literature review on this topic showcases the variety of definitions and explanations of culture. In order to identify common features among culture definitions, the paper uses the categorization suggested by Zimmerman, presented Table 1 (Zimmerman, 2010).

Table 1 Categorization of definitions on culture (Zimmerman,2010)	
Author	Definition
Becker & Geer	Culture is a set of common understandings expressed in language
Douglas	Culture, in the sense of the public, standardizes values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas are tidily ordered (in Zimmerman, Douglas, 1966, p.39)
Geertz	Culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions

	expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes towards life (in Zimmerman, Geertz, 1993)
GLOBE-Project	Culture consists of shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations.
Hall	Culture is communication and communication is culture. (in Zimmerman, Hall, 1959, p.186)
Hofstede	Culture is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one human group from another. (in Zimmerman, Hofstede, 2001, p9)
Kroeber & Kluckhohn	Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behaviour, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. (in Zimmerman, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963, p.181)

Based on these definitions, Zimmerman draws four common characterisitcs of culture:

• The first is categorized by Bolten as perceptas /visible/ and conceptas /invisible/. The visible perceptions can't be explained or understood without the invisible concepts.

• The second characteristic: all the definitions imply the collective character of culture because it is the "collective programming of the mind" (Hofstede, 2001, p.4).

• The third common characteristic - there is no culture without communication (Hall, 1959). This is another manifestation of Whorf/Sapir hypothesis, which clarifies the interconnectedness between communication and culture. Language, thought and perception are interrelated'

• Last, culture occurs in different areas of life as demonstrated by Hofstede's 'onion's model'.

Probably, the definition of culture by Walker (in Zimmerman, 2010) as a "force that operates deep in the shadows of our interactions" can be regarded as the foundation for understanding communication in multicultural teams. It implies the notion that each team member is influenced by culture in various forms, no matter if this influence is sensed and analysed.

2.2.   Intercultural Competence – Static and Dynamic Models

According to Deardorff   'Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006, p.3). The paper accepts this notion as a starting point to discuss the different approaches towards it.

Studies describe intercultural competence either in a static way, the so-called structure – oriented models or as a dynamic process, the so-called process – oriented models (in Zimmerman, 2010).

The structure-oriented approach uses the concept of four building blocks to define intercultural competence: (a) motivation, (b) knowledge, (c) skills and (d) attitudes. Bolten (in Zimmerman, 2010) has compiled an "Acting Competence Model" (Figure 1) combining several blocks and dividing competence into five sub-competence areas: professional, strategic, social, personal and intercultural, which influence each other (Figure 1).

Many authors have studied intercultural competence to answer the question: 'how to become an interculturally competent communicator'. Thus a certain number of development or process – oriented models exist, two of which are cited here.

Deardorff has developed a circular model of intercultural competence. It showcases intercultural competence as a continual, dynamic process (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006). It develops like an upward spiral as intercultural competence climbs up through diverse dimensions. It starts from attitudes, which leads to intercultural knowledge and skills, then develops into intercultural reflection as an internal outcome, and finally, this process leads to constructive interaction as the external outcome.

Figure 1 "Acting Competence Model" adapted (in Zimmerman, 2010)
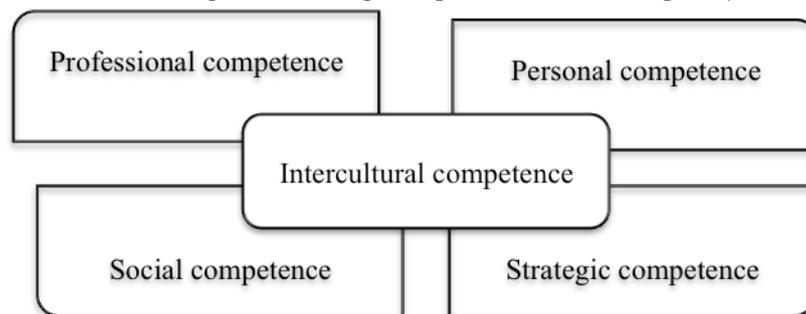
Bennett (1998) assembled his model of "Development of Intercultural Sensitivity" based on a similar idea for process development.

The DMIS model clearly sets two very important stages: ethnocentric and ethnorelative. The first carries the meaning that most of the personal reactions and opinions are drawn based solely on their own cultural experience and background. The sub stages that follow (denial, defense, minimization) depict the stressful overcoming of ethnocentric concepts under the impact of intercultural encounters.

Bennett uses this model to construct a training concept on how to move from the ethnocentric to the ethnorelative stage. The awareness and understanding of other cultures can be obtained through adequate trainings, whose final purpose is adaptation and integration, when a person has developed a thorough understanding of the invisible parts of culture as to explain their visible perceptions or the so called 'Intercultural sensitivity'.

Figure 2: Development of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1998, p.26)

Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration
Ethnocentric Stages			Ethnorelative Stages		

2.3.   EU Multicultural Teams – Setting up and Communication

Having discussed the interconnectedness between culture and intercultural competence, now the paper turns to analysing the challenges in multicultural team communication.

Communication in project management can be carried out to external audiences (the target community, the governing body of the program, other institutions) and internal audiences (among team members). As far as external audiences are concerned, the European cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programs define explicit regulations, detailed in the specific Communication Strategy of each program.

However the setting up, the functioning and the communication within a team remain entirely under the responsibility of the coordinator who needs to plan, coordinate and manage them.

Practice shows that cross-border and trans border EU programs cover broad and distant geographical areas, which could be even hardly accessible. Such programme settings might result in setting multicultural project teams, whose members enjoy rare personal intercourses. Being representatives of various cultures of even neighboring border regions in the European Union, they have diverse patterns of perception and behaviour (perceptas and conceptas).

While in traditional homogeneous teams, it is usually known what motivates the members and creates cohesion, multicultural environment often removes these unifying factors. In a multicultural team we see only the tip of the cultural iceberg.

Thus intercultural competence, the competence on how to communicate and behave effectively across cultures, becomes the major asset.

At this point the paper discusses how effective multicultural teams can be. Effectiveness in teams has already been explored by project Virtual Environment, ViOpe ", Erasmus Intensive Programme in" Learning Computer Programming, funded by the program "Lifelong Learning". Figure 3 describes the team

effectiveness in monoculture and multicultural teams as structured by ViOpe. It appears that the multi-cultural units usually have more than or less than average performance. Based on the findings, the paper draws the conclusion that if multiculturalism in a team is well managed, it will become a team asset, and will enhance effective performance. If the necessity for effective intercultural communication is ignored, it increases the probability of creating problems and reduces the efficiency.

Figure 3: Effectiveness in monoculture / multicultural teams as structured by ViOpe
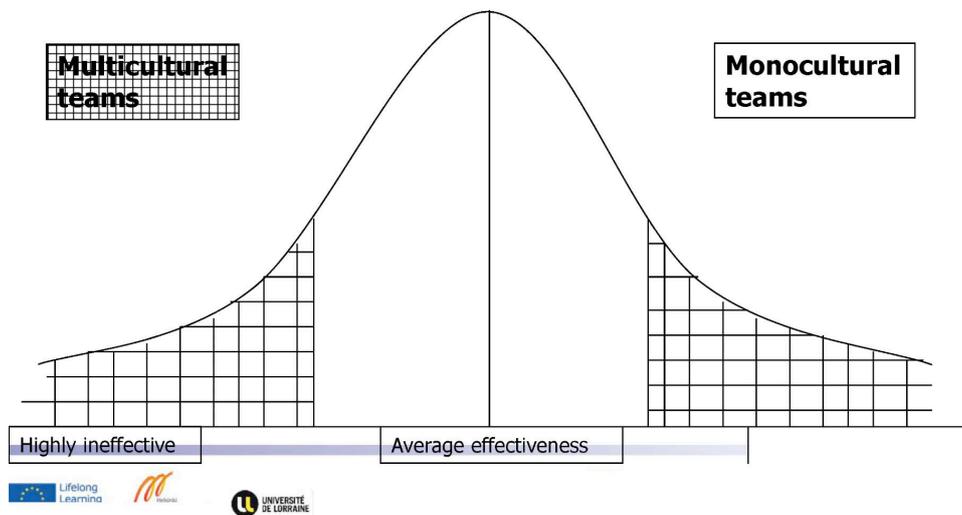
Thus it becomes clear that intercultural competence is a major factor to achieve effective communication for successful team performance.

2.3. Internet Survey on Intercultural Competence Self- Evaluation

It is interesting to explore whether experts from the Danube region, working in multicultural teams have come to the same conclusions. Thus the author has developed an Internet survey, which finds grounds on the Deardorff's model of the spiral process of acquiring intercultural competence. It was circulated among 50 experts, who were asked to evaluate their own intercultural competence and grade their need for adequate training

Twenty Bulgarian and twelve foreign experts responded to the interview. The Bulgarian respondents are mainly women (16) from the age group 40-50 years, while eight foreigners are predominantly men (8) at the age of 30-40 years. None of the experts was unemployed at the time of the interview. Most Bulgarians come from the NGO sector (7), while from the group of foreigners an equal number of people (4) deal with non-governmental sectors or with another type of business.

The results clearly indicate that Bulgarian experts still have fewer contacts with representatives of different cultures and rarely participate in international teams

(only 12 out of 20 respondents). In contrast, seven international experts assert that a multinational environment is common for them, and three people indicate that working in international teams is a frequent case for them.

Bulgarian experts confess that they don't proud themselves on foreign language skills and have difficulties in every-day communication. That's why 75% of respondents. Bulgarian experts indicate the language barrier as an important obstacle to communication. In contrast, foreign experts declare good language skills, which obviously help in intercultural communication.

The responses of both groups showcase a sufficient level of awareness of cultural differences but only ten people are convinced that sometimes misunderstandings arise precisely because of cultural clashes. Out of twelve Bulgarian experts who have worked in international teams, seven share the opinion that sometimes problems arise from different cultures. Two respondents deny definitely the possibility for unhealthy work environment caused by cultural clashes and two are a hundred percent sure that cultural differences can't result in difficult communication.

In terms of attitudes towards training for improving intercultural communication skills, 50% of foreign experts state they did attend training when preparing for multicultural teamwork. Out of the group, five persons consider it useful, while the others deny its applicability.

Interestingly enough, 65% of the Bulgarian experts declare preliminary acquaintance with the culture of the country they are going to visit or at least believe that it is important to know the place before visiting. In contrast, 50% of the foreigners don't find such a preparation necessary for a better understanding of cultural sensitivity.

In this case, if we follow the spiral development model Deardorff, we can conclude that the respondents who have already had intercultural contacts have gone through the first part of the learning spiral. At this stage they can reflect on intercultural events as internal result. They already show intercultural effective and appropriate behavior, which forms intercultural competence. Their internal change ensures that appropriate educational content that meets their current needs skills to work in multicultural teams and served in an interactive style adult education will develop intercultural competence.

2.4.   Recommended   Training   Model   on   Improving   Intercultural Competence

Based on the hands-on experience in the training 'To become diplomats between cultures', developed and performed by the Comparative Research Network, the author suggests a certain training model on improving intercultural competence. The latter uses self - evaluation to correctly position the trainnee at the beginning. This particular training model is preferably selected because:

• It is based on the comprehensive Bennett concept of improving intercultural competence "Development of Intercultural Sensitivity" (Bennett, 2002) previously described. It takes into account the personal experience in cultural encounters and creates a hands-on opportunity to develop cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills, which compose intercultural competence.

• It includes a reflection on the emotional state of the participants in the process thus seeks to influence "imagine, norms and values" of the invisible part of the cultural model (according to Hall). This feature of the model is a direct link to the Deardorff's spiral model

• Trainees might be at different stages of development of individual intercultural skills

• It is specialized for experts working in European projects and applies exclusively interactive, exciting and involving educational teaching methods, specialized for adults. Some of the training sessions use of the method of teaching intercultural communication through the use of case studies within the European School. The applicability of this method is justified in developing "training in intercultural communication through the use of case studies" (Popova, 2008).

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