

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS IN ORDER TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE TEAMS IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING

Sylnovie Merchant, School of Business and Economics, Lynchburg College, 1501 Lakeside Drive, Lynchburg, VA 24501, 434-544-8177, merchant.s@lynchburg.edu

ABSTRACT

Culture is a powerful determinant of how individuals approach work and how they respond to team dynamics, and it is argued that the cultural orientation of the individual is a major influence on how individual approach their assignments and relationships. One of the critical jobs of top management is to help their employees relate better to the global problems and opportunities of the company. Yet, in order to work effectively with diverse people, individuals need to know not only about the culture of the person with whom they're interacting, but also information about their personality, behavior, demographics and life experiences. In this multicultural environment individuals have to be aware of the diversity of perspectives, interests, and resources of different cultures.

Characteristics of students vary from university to university, as students are a product of their environment and select a school based upon where they feel they fit in. Specifically, characteristics other than student ability and preparation can have a large impact on how students approach their studies. This is impacted by the "culture" in which the student was raised. These differences are not meant to imply that students are better or worse than others, but students have different goals, aspirations, and experiences that have shaped their approach to life. As a result, different approaches have been attempted to maximize the learning potential of management students.

Business education and training have been taught for many years in a variety of ways with many different approaches. One of the primary approaches to teaching students in business has been the use of student teams. The ability to work in teams has become important in business education and has been studied by various authors. However, while these studies are interesting from an individual standpoint, they fail to integrate an identification of the cultural background and orientation of the students. As universities increasingly reflect the cultural diversity of the world, it is important to investigate how differing cultures affect the team work which has become an integral part of business education. The purpose of this research is to investigate the role played by culture on the dynamics of teamwork in education.

A data collection instrument was been modified to capture student information while working in a team. Besides demographics, there were 16 questions on what motivates a student to participate on a team project, and 15 questions that assesses the cultural orientation of the students, asking such questions as: what makes a good team leader, what makes a good team member, who should make decisions, how should conflict be resolved, etc. The instrument was distributed to students in different concentrations in a College of Business at a California university. Preliminary analysis shows that there are differences among the different cultural student groups.