



Fostering collaboration between people with different backgrounds

The challenge

Many teams are made up of a collection of individuals with a wide range of profiles, either by virtue of their educational background, their professional function or their cultural origins. Such diversity is often experienced as an obstacle: it is so much easier to work with people who are like us! Indeed, these differences can easily lead to endless debates. And often, when a point of view is finally imposed, it is at the cost of the withdrawal of some participants ... destroying any advantage from combining various viewpoints. However, it does not have to be that way: by respecting a few principles, individuals with varied profiles can work together and effectively combine their differences.

Three key principles

1 ACTIVELY WORK TO INSTILL TRUST	
Difference naturally gives rise to mistrust, more or less admitted or recognized. Trust, however, is essential to involving everyone in ensuring quality discussions. That is why working to create a climate of trust is just as important as ensuring that work progresses.	- Remember to show that you are open to discussion: this will encourage others to adopt the same attitude in kind. E.g.: Openly state your doubts and uncertainties. - Emphasize what brings you closer to your teammates: this will help to develop bonds within the team. E.g.: Talk about similar past experiences; underline your common goal; identify a common "enemy". - Watch your language: avoid using words which give rise to feelings of exclusion or opposition. E.g.: "You Japanese..." In particular, beware of metaphors and humor, often improperly understood by people from a culture different to your own.
2 GUARD AGAINST THE RISKS OF MISUNDERSTANDING	
Between team members with different ways of thinking, there is a high risk of misunderstanding. You must therefore adapt your method of communicating in order to maximize your chances of being understood, despite the diversity of styles of your teammates.	- Try to adapt your argument to the other person's way of thinking. E.g.: With people who favor ideas, underline what is new. For those who prefer facts, focus on how your ideas might be implemented. - Don't hesitate to formulate the same message in several forms. E.g.: Illustrate your speech with diagrams on a paperboard; summarize in writing the key conclusions of an exchange. Ask for feedback on how each person communicates. In this way, you can also become aware of how your messages are perceived. E.g.: Your natural reserve may give the impression that you do not agree.
3 ACCEPT THAT DIFFERENT APPROACHES CAN BE VALID	
When points of view are very different, everyone has a tendency to judge the approach of the other to be wrong. To ensure constructive exchange, it is essential to try and understand the advantages of another person's approach, and be able to sometimes let go of your own point of view.	- Make sure you present your opinions as a point of view, and not as an absolute truth. - When a point of view bothers you, force yourself to reserve judgment in order to keep listening. If you are too busy listing what you judge to be wrong or preparing your rebuttal, you will lose the opportunity to better understand the reasoning behind a point of view different from your own... - Encourage everyone to explain the logic behind their conclusions. By focusing conversation on the "why" rather than on the "for or against", you will encourage everyone to look for the advantages of each point of view around the table. - There are several valid ways of approaching the same problem. Adopt an approach different from your own is not a question of backing down, but rather of extending your trust to the other.