

Overcoming prejudice in a diverse team

The challenge

When a team includes individuals of diverse origins, tension may easily arise, because the more nationalities, ages, genders, professions and company cultures there are, the greater the chances of misunderstanding or disagreement. Very often, these tensions are exacerbated by the existence of cultural biases, which are shortcuts used to explain the problems encountered with a given individual, e.g. the accountant is meddlesome, the Italian is disorganized, women are hypersensitive, etc. But such explanations, even if they're not always false, generally lead to a simplified or erroneous interpretation of the behavior of another person. Cultural biases are natural and somewhat inevitable, but they must be managed to avoid their potentially destructive impact.

Knowing the limits of your prejudices

The approach presented below will help you work as constructively as possible in a multicultural team.

Prejudices are inevitable: they are our brains' way of simplifying the complexity of our environment.

- **Don't deny your prejudices** on the pretext that they are not "politically correct": you would risk being unaware of their influence on you, and consequently unable to control them.
- **Don't confuse prejudice and narrow-mindedness.** It is normal to have preconceived ideas about others: the challenge is not so much to abandon them as to remain open to the idea that they may well be wrong.

- **Reformulate** explicitly your perception of the other so as to make cooperation possible. E.g.: "Young people are not motivated" → "Young people are motivated by factors other than those of my generation"
- Remember that this reformulation **is also a prejudice**, that you may have to call into question in the future!



Some prejudices may damage relations with your contacts – for example by causing you to negatively interpret all their reactions. Try to identify these harmful prejudices.

- **Make a note of your automatic thoughts.** E.g.: "Another fussy jurist!"
- **Identify the negative convictions** they generate. E.g.: "I'm going to waste time working with him!"
- Try to identify your **behaviors associated** with these convictions. E.g.: Lack of goodwill, exaggerated criticalness, etc.

It is difficult to abandon your prejudices, even when you know they are unfounded. Some techniques can help you prevent them from damaging your relations with others.

- Seize opportunities to **speak openly** about your prejudices, frankly and without hostility. E.g.: "I know you come from a very hierarchical company, whereas I have always worked in very consensual environments..."
- Systematically **counteract** your automatic thoughts. E.g.: "He is not motivated, like all young people nowadays" → "Could he be motivated if the project was presented to him differently?"
- When confronted with viewpoints different from your own, try to **search for what makes them legitimate**. E.g.: "What are the advantages of this apparently chaotic way of organizing things?"

Prejudices are stereotypes from our culture, education, experience, etc. A rational examination will often lead you to realize that they have no logical foundation.

- **In which circumstances** did you forge this prejudice? Could you have interpreted the situation differently? E.g.: Could what you attribute to the ambition of a young graduate have another cause?
- Do you know any **counter-examples** to this prejudice? E.g.: A good sales person with a strong team spirit, a dynamic fifty year-old, meticulous and organized Italians, etc.
- More than the outcome of an objective observation of reality, **isn't your prejudice a result of the advantage you gain from it?** E.g.: You feel reassured to believe that the other person is the source of your difficulties, you then feel free of having to make an effort, etc.