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The Napoleon cake

Or

The international team is more than just culture

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The international team as a 'Napoleon cake'

If you order a 'Napoleon' in a cake shop in Sweden or Norway, you will be served a layer cake. More poetically, in southern Europe, it is called a 'mille foglio' (Italy), or 'mille feuilles' (France). The more skilled the patissier, the finer and more layers there will be in your cake. In Dutch they called it Tom Poes, referring to a very clever and creative Cat who always saved himself out of tricky situations.

We use the Napoleon here as an image to understand the international or virtual team. My point in this article is that there is more to understanding an international team than focusing on national cultures.

Introduction

Diversity is a hot topic nowadays. Since the late nineties, this item which has been popular for a while in North America, landed on the Human Resources manager's agenda in many European corporations. Originally, the term referred to ethnic and racial differences in the workplace. Over the years, the definition of diversity has broadened and now becomes a 'waste basket' phrase for any other type of differences including gender, occupational background and individual personalities. This is consistent with our findings as practitioners, consulting to international teams and executives, that over-emphasizing cultural differences in a team is one sided and does not lead to the desired results.

The team

So, using the Napoleon cake as an image to understand the international team, what does it look like?

The common purpose: the thicker crust on the bottom of the cake

A team is a group of individuals working on a common purpose. Repeated research has shown us that the secret to a strong team is a clear common purpose and identification of each member with that group task (Miller, Katzenbach). Any type of analysis of a team should start with looking at its reason for existence: what is this group trying to accomplish?

Cross-cultural differences: a number of waver thin layers of pastry

The classic authors on cross-cultural aspects of leadership, such as Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars have emphasized the importance of looking at cross-cultural differences within a team. In the 1980's, notably Hofstede's work has opened many people's eyes to important differences in management style, by popularizing concepts such as Power distance and Individualism. Since then, countless people have read related books and attended seminars on cross-cultural management, and it has become mainstream to recognize cultural differences and use them as a framework for explaining team dynamics.

Individual differences: more thin layers

Peer Gynt described our personality as an onion: when you peel it, you find layer after layer and finally there is no core in the middle; all you do is to end up crying with nothing in your hands. Pastries however, usually do not make people cry.

Obviously, many of the differences that members bring to a team, are rooted in their personality structure and not in their cultural background. An American psycho-therapist in France offered this comment: 'an asshole is an asshole in any culture'. Looking at international teams only from a cross-cultural perspective, we may actually fool ourselves by being overly politically correct and incorrectly showing patience for universally 'bad behaviour'. Cultural difference is not an excuse for misbehaving or being inflexible.

For wanting to look at individual differences, the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, based on Carl Jung's model of personality type, is a fine instrument to make them visible. It offers many insight into the constructive use of differences within both an international as well as a mono-cultural team. The model is based on personality preferences and recognizes the unique contribution of each personality type. Teams tend to benefit from the model as it focuses on what each brings to the team rather than condemning certain types of behaviour.

Other 'cultural' identities: mille feuilles

Other 'partial' identities that members bring to a team tend to be rather underrated in terms of their impact. They include professional identity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, educational background etc. The cake has as many layers as you are willing to handle.

André Laurent from Insead provides an elegant example of professional identity overriding the impact of national culture by his research into French and German multinational corporations. He looked at finance professionals from France and Germany, working for the same corporation, and found them to be more similar in their ways than a sample of French finance and French marketing professionals. This clearly shows how misleading it can be to look through the lens of national culture only.

"Ever since he was a boy Flaubert had the habit of denying he was a Frenchman. He deeply detested his home country and fellow countrymen, and had a lifelong yearning for Egypt. He

proposed a new way of determining a person's nationality: not based on the place you are born or the family you come from, but on one's longing for particular places. It was only logical for Flaubert to stretch this theory of development of identity to gender and species, so that at one time he declared that in essence he was a camel, a bear and a woman. 'I feel like buying a painting of a bear, have it framed, and put it in my bedroom and calling it 'Portrait of Gustave Flaubert' in order to represent my moral conditions and behaviour patterns'. (de Bottom)."

Group dynamics: the cream between the layers

A group of highly skilled individuals who are eager to achieve something together. But then: the work doesn't get done, time is wasted, competition within the group takes off, games are being played. Anyone has experienced the unexpected and irrational phenomena that creep into a group and keeps a team from doing its work. People are not just rational beings but bring another side to work as well that includes emotions, primitive ideas and feelings. A group can get sucked 'off task' by these irrational processes.

And of course, the opposite: most of us remember a time in our life when we were part of a group where everything seemed just right. A group that is well 'on task' can be exhilarating when the whole indeed is more than the sum of its parts. When asked, in my experience people report not more than one to five of these experiences in their lifetime, and this includes sports, music, and other non-work related activities.

Systems, procedures and controls: the butter

The fatty agent in a pastry keeps all the elements together, and gives it a smooth texture. For any team to function well, there need to be procedures: how do we do things around here, how do we communicate. Also systems, such as budgeting, project planning and ICT, and control. In many cases teams have engaged in teambuilding efforts, when it turned out the main problem was that the systems do not support the team's purpose. Very little to do with cross-cultural or interpersonal issues.

The icing on the cake: leadership

Managing internationally successfully takes a fair degree of life experience. Competencies such as openness, ability to deal with ambiguity, patience, resilience and humour, often quoted by researchers as key to international success, clearly are not learnt by attending a business school. Variety of experience and especially hardship (and recovering from that) are the best teachers. The CEO of Unilever, Antony Burgmans, makes a fine understatement in a recent interview in the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad, saying "it took us most of the last century to create the cross-cultural awareness that we now have in the management structure". Developing leadership seems to be a layer cake in itself: gradually adding one layer to another as the experience builds. The international dimension is a particularly delicate and challenging layer on top of the leadership skills needed in a monocultural environment.

What is the use?

In our coaching work with leaders we encounter many executives who struggle with managing international teams, be it virtual or in one location. We thereby use the Napoleon-cake model to identify the factors (layers) that are of importance for the performance of the team. Often clients tell us that they have learnt about cross-cultural models but that it does not really help them to solve their problems and increase the performance of the team at hand. Seminars on cross-cultural management can be useful as an eye-opener but are far too limited in scope to solve the real business issues. Caution is necessary when consultants or models offer linear solutions to team problems, addressing only one distinct layer of the cake. A simple solution may sound very tempting, but over reducing complexity will probably not yield the results one is looking for.

Summary

In this day and age, organizations often have to depend heavily on cross-cultural teams, in many cases geographically dispersed. With diversity being one of the buzz words of this decade, with an emphasis on the cross-cultural aspect, we may look all to quickly from that angle when we are faced with a dysfunctional team. Whether in the manager's role or the consultant.

The layer cake model can help to remind us of the complexity of teams and to choose the right angle when 'fixing' a team.

The author

Fredrik Fogelberg is managing partner of Nomadic International Business Psychology and is based in the Netherlands with partners across the world. He works in six languages. www.nomadicibp.com

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