

CASE STUDY (5)

DIVERSITY ICEBREAKER IN CROSS-CULTURAL PROJECT LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Consultant/case author:

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Areas:

Cross-cultural project leadership

Brief

Globalization implies that more projects are organized across cultures. This is particularly visible in Norway, and especially in the oil and gas industry, where the demand for highly qualified workforce is always high and drives organisations to seek for experts outside the country. Sometimes work within projects is done virtually, on other occasions particular employees are outsourced part time - and gradually more participants are coming from different cultures. This leads to new challenges, since insufficient understanding of different cultures and managing the unconscious, and value based, cultural differences becomes a visible issue. To build trust, sustain motivation and commitment across cultural differences proves to be a challenge, especially when team members do not share the same physical working location

The present case study is based on nearly 20 two-day trainings with similar groups of managers and leaders I conducted within the global oil and gas industry. All these groups were facing similar challenges and problems, in various extents, related to cross-cultural factors and geographical dispersion. The goal was to provide the managers and team leaders a better understanding of cross-cultural diversity and tools to handle it.

Action

Below is the standard agenda for two days of training with descriptions of group work exercises and discussion themes:

Day 1	
9.30	Introduction: beginning with the presentation of the participants, program and facilitators
10.00	The classical Diversity Icebreaker seminar. NOTE: in the 4 th stage of the seminar, special attention and focus is given to the roles of colours in different phases of project development ¹ .
11.30	Communication: use of the Mapping-Bridging-Integration model ²
12.30	Lunch
13.00	Diversity Management – discussion of the Team Pyramid ³
14.00	Lecture: Introduction to the concept of Culture and Cultural Values

¹ More in the Diversity Icebreaker Personal Workbook.

² See: DiStefano, J. J., & Maznevski, M. L. (2000). Creating value with diverse teams in global management. *Organizational Dynamics*, 29(1), 45-63 and: Esnault, M., & Ekelund, B. Z. (2008). Project Start-Up. Oslo: Human Factors Publishing (available to order via Human Factors AS).

³ Description of the Team Pyramid can be find in the Diversity Icebreaker User Manual.

15.30	Cultural dimensions – an inquiry questionnaire (participants answer and elaborate on a list of questions)
16.00	Group work: participants elaborate on chosen, relevant cultural dimensions and share experiences related to them in order to build a more thorough understanding of culture.
Day 2	
8.30	Sharing reflections from the previous day.
8.45	Group work: different negotiation strategies for Red, Blue and Green. Discussion and reflections on implicit and explicit negotiation models.
10.00	Lecture: Leading a temporary organization – introducing team spirit, establishing processes and norms, identity building.
11.30	Lecture: Multicultural site/organization – challenges and opportunities.
12.30	Lunch
13.00	Lecture: Trust building processes across cultures.
14.00	Exercise: “Project leader’s direction finder – The six different perspectives”
14.00	Individual exercise: Creating my own project leader plan (the participants write down goals, strategies and plan actions for the nearest future in their project work, based on what they have learned during the seminar).

Results

There are three groups of effects that the Diversity Icebreaker brings about when employed in such training programs:

First of all, the categories of Red, Blue and Green, established early in the process with the classical DI seminar, continue into other elements of the training (group work and discussions about different process stages, negotiation strategies, diversity management, cultural dimensions and leadership directions). They are sometimes explicitly introduced by the consultant and other times spontaneously used by participants. Most importantly, they are easy to understand and accessible for all who took part in the training, and thus used in teams afterwards as a tool and mean of communication when managing processes similar to those worked through in this training.

Second of all, and particularly relevant for project work organized across cultures, the Diversity Icebreaker seminar provides a model of diversity, universal for all cultures and much simpler than the complex world of cultural dimensions. The participants use this model – reflected in the language of Red, Blue and Green – as a mean of communication and a way to approach others and comprehend cultures they represent. Values, behaviours and attitudes differ across cultures, but the participants can identify the familiar Red, Blue and Green elements across these differences, what gives them the self-confidence to approach someone totally new and different. The DI model – together with the seminar’s trust [boosting effect](#) – reduces the fear of diversity.

Third, a shared group identity in temporal project teams organized across cultures is non-existent at the beginning. The classical Diversity Icebreaker seminar engages participants in a shared and positive experience, when they laugh together and exchange perspectives. This makes them get to know each other in a very safe and open atmosphere, an event they will remember and something the very first thing they did together. Furthermore, already mentioned before, the language of Red, Blue and Green is constructed and acknowledged by the participants during the seminar. As one of the most important elements of culture and identity, this language they created together, is an important beginning for identity building in the group.

About the author:

Bjørn Z. Ekelund is a Norwegian organizational psychologist with 25 years of experience in managing small consultant companies, founder of Human Factors AS and creator as well as developer of the Diversity Icebreaker. In 2008 he was awarded with the prize “Best consultant of the year” for his international breakthrough with this concept.

Read more about Bjørn [here](#).

