Martin Sebastian Scheuplein

Valuing and incorporating cultural differences in multicultural groups

An example of working with Indian cultural counterparts

Thesis (M.A.)

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de .

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Imprint:

Copyright © 2009 GRIN Verlag
ISBN: 9783640661602

This book at GRIN:

https://www.grin.com/document/153805

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Magisterarbeit zur Erlangung
des akademischen Grades Magister Artium
eingereicht im Oktober 2009

von Martin Sebastian Scheuplein

Content:

1. Introduction 5
2. Theoretical framework 7
2.1. Relevance of the topic – multicultural teams and their performance 7
2.2. Location in the academic field 11
2.3. A discourse on "Culture" and its place in the intercultural group 12
2.4. On the hierarchy of needs and cultural safety in intercultural groups 17
2.5. Intercultural Communication 20
3. On groups vs. teams, their culture and development 28
3.1. The difference between Groups and Teams 28
3.2. A differentiation between mono-cultural and multicultural groups 29
3.3. A working definition of Group Development 31
3.4. Classification of the theoretical models of group development 32
4. The combined FIRO cycle 33
4.1. The first phase: "Forming" 34
4.2. The second phase: "Conflict" or "Storming" 35
4.3. The third phase: "Norming" 36
4.4. The forth phase: "Production" or "Performing" 37
4.5. The fifth phase: "Termination" or "Adjourning" 37
4.6. Discussion of the combined FIRO cycle 38
4.7. The intercultural group in the model of the FIRO cycle 39
4.7.1. Task related strategies 41
4.7.2. Process related strategies 43
5. Uses and dangers of stereotypes when learning about a new culture 45
5.1. Hofstede's representation of cultures through cultural dimensions 49
5.2. The example of India as a constructed image 55
6. Contemporary representations of the Indian culture 57
6.1. The Hindu belief system 58
6.1.1. *Moksha* – the goal of life 59
6.1.2. Dharma – doing right and wrong 59
6.1.3. Karma – rebirth and the Indian mind 60
6.1.4. The four stages of life 61
6.1.5. Hierarchical principles 62

6.2. Implications of the Hindu belief system 62
6.3. India's cultural dimensions 65
6.3.1. Dimension: individualism vs. collectivism 66
6.3.2. Dimension: distance to power vs. equality 66
6.3.3. Dimension: avoiding uncertainty 67
6.3.4. Dimension: masculinity and femininity 67
6.3.5. Dimension: Time and time-orientation 68
6.4. A metaphorical journey of describing India 70
7. Incorporating culture into the work with intercultural group participants 72
7.1. The mapping phase 74
7.2. Using stereotypes from the business literature as a cultural map 77
7.3. Building bridges 78
7.4. Integrating the insights and synergizing them into new solutions 80
8. Conclusion 80
9. Literature: 83
Abstract in German: 91

List of figures:

Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs……...……..…… 18
Figure 2: Balancing cultural safety ...……...……...…….…….. 20
Figure 3: Communication model …….…….. 24
Figure 4: Classification of Group Development Models …….…….. 32
Figure 5: The combined FIRO cycle …….…….…… 34
Figure 6: Task and Process aspects in the intercultural group …….…….. 40
Figure 7: Cultural dimensions ……. 52
Figure 8: The 'map-bridge-integrate' model …….…….……. 74
Figure 9: Cultural values & behavioral patterns …….……..…… 77

"One has to recognize that countries and people differ in their approach and their ways of living and thinking. In order to understand them we have to understand their way of life and approach. If we wish to convince them, we have to use their language as far as we can, not language in the narrow sense of the word, but the language of the mind."

- Jawaharlal Nehru

1. Introduction

During my time in India in the winter of 2007, I had the chance to work at the GTZ office (German agency for technical development cooperation GmbH) in New Delhi. My internship there took place in the department of 'microfinance', where I had the chance to experience directly the multicultural interactions in a group of people from two different countries. As German and Indian employees were working together, we had to cooperate with each other in order to work effectively and agree on a common direction. From this interaction experience and from seeing the different approaches to work, my desire to learn about the intercultural aspects of work groups grew. I have been specifically interested in how to improve the interpersonal interaction process of people from different cultural backgrounds. Based on my work as a trainer for youth groups before and after my stay in India, I aimed to combine this experience with the previous question and sought to propose a generalized solution on how a facilitator can improve the interpersonal interaction process within a group of participants coming from different cultural backgrounds, and specifically for groups with people from India.

This work therefore explores the implications of culture for multicultural groups and suggests ways of recognizing cultural differences with the aim of incorporating them into the group structure in the long run. In order to build an effective and supporting intercultural team, the cultural differences need to be acknowledged and not glossed over, so that the group can build on these strengths to find innovative and creative solutions. On the premise that group participants develop stereotypical assumptions about the cultural other that may hinder the communication and interaction process, this work sets out to suggest solutions to this problem. In this context, the current approaches to intercultural group work are insufficient and ineffective because they not only lack the theoretical background that helps to foster the understanding of cultural differences, but also fail to integrate the implications of these insights into an approach for the effective development of the group. To this purpose, the general aim of this paper is to lay out ways in which culturally diverse groups differ in their usual phases of group dynamics and to suggest ways of enhancing the team building process so that the group can pass smoothly through its problematic stages and reach its full