

**BURGERS AND SPÄTZLE:
An Approach to Transcending Differences in International Corporations
By Heather Robinson & Rita Wuebbeler**

ABSTRACT. The number of international teams working in the corporate environment is increasing. These can be of various types – token groups, bicultural groups or multicultural groups. The focus of the article is German-American bicultural teams. Several cultural differences hinder productivity in such teams including differences in corporate organizational models, concept and function of teams, motivation strategies, communication style, problem solving and decision-making processes, relationship to time and language. Each of these differences is explored briefly. Goals for interventions that move German-American teams beyond these differences are outlined and design consideration for such interventions considered. Such considerations include competence of the facilitation team, stage of the team's development, effectiveness of the needs assessment and the degree of management support and participation. A specific methodology for creating cultural synergy is outlined and guidelines useful in German-American team interventions are discussed.

Introduction

German companies have been involved in global business ventures since the advent of the industrial age. The U.S. was one of the first destinations with Bayer already having a branch in Albany, New York in 1865. Currently the amount of German investment in the U.S. is remarkable -- nearly 60% of the \$300 billion in German foreign investment are in the United States, compared to 19 percent in Great Britain, 9 percent in Italy, and about 5 percent in France. Germany, being the largest economy in Europe is, of course, a prime target for the interests of U.S. corporations.

As corporations come together, their people come together as well. Increased affordability and ease of communication with frequent air connections, reasonable telephone rates and the convenience of e-mail are also fostering an increase in the creation of teams that find themselves straddling Germany and the U.S.

The first part of this article provides a cursory overview of the issues relevant to the functioning of German-American bicultural teams. It is not meant to be an exhaustive scholarly description of German-American differences. The second part suggests measures that can be taken to foster productivity in German-American teams many of which can be applied to other binational or multinational settings.

TEAMS AND DIFFERENCES

Types of Teams

International teams can be divided into three types -- token groups, bicultural groups and multicultural groups. Token groups are those in which the majority of the group is of a particular culture, with a single individual from a second culture -- an otherwise entirely French group with a single German team member, for instance. Bicultural groups are those in which two nationalities are represented on the team in roughly equal numbers. In

multicultural groups, members represent three or more nationalities. The types of groups have overlap in the nature of their dynamics as well as having characteristics particular to their own type.

Bicultural Teams. We will concern ourselves here exclusively with the German-American bicultural group. That being said, it is important to remember that under the rubric of "German" or "American" we often encounter members of the team who may bring with them another heritage culture that can influence the dynamics. Given the demographic realities of the U.S. and Germany, this is more frequently the case with the American members of the team. Nevertheless, while not wishing to stereotype, we will deal with our comments regarding the two nationalities within these groups as though they were internally homogeneous.

Bicultural teams tend to succeed or fail with excess -- they are either highly ineffective or highly effective. Diversity in and of itself is not a recipe for excellence; well-managed diversity is.

Bicultural teams tend to be better at certain things and not so proficient at others. Initial group formation, decision-making and implementation are a greater challenge to bicultural teams than to monocultural teams, whereas bicultural teams can truly excel at creating ideas.

Bicultural teams go through similar phases in their path to productivity as do other teams. The most commonly cited sequence is Bruce Tuckman's "Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing". Moving through the phases for bicultural teams can be complicated by a variety of factors including mistrust, miscommunication and a high level of stress. How well and how quickly the group comes to terms with these issues depends on the level of intercultural sensitivity of the various individual members of the group towards their international counterparts.

A dynamic particular to bicultural groups is the possible entrenchment in an "us vs. them" attitude based on nationality. A further embroidering of this dynamic is the identification of those who express openness towards the "others" as being turncoats.

Stumbling Blocks Encountered by German-American Teams

Several cultural differences hinder the smooth progress of German-American teams on their way to productivity including differences in:

- **corporate organizational models**
- **concept and function of teams**
- **motivation strategies**
- **communication style**
- **problem solving and decision-making processes**
- **relationship to time**
- **language**

Differing Corporate Organizational Models. Both German and American corporations tend towards flat hierarchical structures relative to many other cultures. However, the German cultural tendency to value the predictability and reproducibility afforded by formality, rules, documentation and standardized procedures, versus the American cultural tendency to value flexibility and speed, results in German corporations taking on vertical structures that persist whereas U.S. corporations often work with relatively fluid matrix organization.

Concept and Function of Teams. The German concept of a team is a group of individuals each with a specific expertise under a strong leader with a specific objective and a recognized place in the overall organization. Ad hoc groups across hierarchical lines are unlikely to evoke whole-hearted commitment. Teams must be properly constituted, have a place in the timetable and the organization chart and not add to the team members' workload. The German team comes together initially to define objectives and the task boundaries for the individual team members. Then the expectation is that the individual team members work independently on their specific tasks to the very best of their ability, coming together again only to assemble the interlocking pieces.

The American idea of a team involves frequent meetings, brainstorming, ("just say the first idea that comes to mind, we'll evaluate later"), much overlap of activity ("you do your version, I'll do mine, then we'll compare and combine the best elements of the two"), building on one another's thoughts ("yes, and" (an expression when translated literally into German results in the demotivating, "ja, und")). Thus, American teams are both internally competitive and cooperative. Teams are formed ad hoc for a short period of time to accomplish a specific goal and then disbanded. Since Americans commit on an as-needed basis, individuals can work on a number of teams at once and feel little need to establish a long-term relationship with their team members.

Thus, the German members of a bicultural team often need a clearer definition of the roles and activities of the team than the Americans in a bicultural team. The German members of a team may misinterpret their American counterparts as being ignorant of or unwilling to work according to best practice. For their part, the Americans may view the methodical clarification and definition process as unwillingness to get to "work". This misinterpretation is often voiced with frustration by the American members of bicultural teams who say, "what we need as a team is to just DO IT!".

Motivation Strategies - "Terrific job" vs. "Not bad". German employees, being the product of a system of standardized, rigorous and selective education and technical training recognized throughout the world for its excellence, are assumed to perform as disciplined and hard-working experts doing work in classical ways and to known standards. They are expected to work independent of external praise. Movement within the organization is relatively infrequent, either laterally or vertically.

In the U.S. work relationships are continuously being redefined. In this ever-changing environment the manager expects a good performance but, in turn, the employee expects praise ("atta-boy's/girl's"), recognition ("employee-of-the-month", an assigned parking spot, a token gift), and new assignments (often based on the ability to manage people, not expertise in the job content), a more impressive job title, or a raise or bonus. Myriad management training programs emphasize the importance of the attitudinal and motivational components of management, citing the importance of compliments, praise and reward as productivity strategies.

Germans on a German-American bicultural team may view the verbal praise expressed by their U.S. counterparts as excessive, phony or suspect ("werde ich hinausgelobt?" ("Are they trying to get rid of me?") "Nehmen die mich auf den Arm?" ("Are they making a fool of me?"). Even if German team members find such praise pleasant, it may be difficult for them to reciprocate, leaving the American team member with the false impression of a lack of goodwill. One of the criterion for a good work environment for Americans includes being recognized and liked by co-workers. When expressions of personal approval are not forthcoming from their German counterparts, American team members have said, "I can't believe I've done a good job. I feel empty inside."

Because one of the motivational strategies commonly used by U.S. managers is reassignment to a new task or department, the tenure of U.S. team members in a particular area of responsibility is often shorter than that of their German counterparts. This can be extremely frustrating to German team members who are accustomed to working relationships of longer duration. They can feel they have wasted their time in committing to the particular relationship and may experience a sense of betrayal or evaluate the decision-maker as incompetent for having erroneously assigned the individual only to reassign them so soon.

Communication Style - "Like me" vs. "Respect me". The basic purpose of communication differs for Germans and Americans. At the risk of oversimplifying, it might be said that Germans communicate to demonstrate what they know and to garner respect while Americans communicate to demonstrate their willingness to get along and desire to be liked. Respect develops slowly while one can "like" someone within minutes. Thus Germans tend to take longer to establish trusting relationships than do Americans. In one study when asked "Do you trust people?", 19 percent of Germans said, "yes" while 55 percent of Americans answered in the affirmative. This leads Americans to display remarkable friendliness and spontaneity vis-à-vis strangers in contrast with Germans who tend to be relatively reserved.

This difference in the way trust is established can cause problems in working relationships. Americans who are assigned to work with a German counterpart and telephone or e-mail requesting information without any preliminary formal authorization (trust by proxy) or face-to-face meeting, are often surprised when their German team member reacts with, "who told you to contact me?", "who exactly are you?", "what is this going to be used for?", "no one informed me of this" or no response at all. The German team member may feel caught off guard because he or she does not know how to respond to the request or genuinely wants to ensure that information is not dispensed indiscriminately. The American can feel rebuffed and insulted and the previous friendliness replaced with a hard-as-nails negotiation stance or complete withdrawal. The German misperceptions in such circumstances can be those of superficiality or sneakiness on the American's part.

Germans and Americans also exhibit markedly different discourse styles. Americans communicate in brief bursts of information. Particularly in business, the ideals are the sound byte and the executive summary with its one page of bulleted information condensing only the most salient points. German academic training encourages a pattern of cognition and expression based on thorough explanation of each of the sub-components of an idea and a subsequent integration into an elegant whole. Germans can perceive American communication as lacking substance, while the Americans can find Germans longwinded and obsessively detail-oriented.

These communication style differences mean that German and American meetings take on different forms. An American meeting generally begins with a round of small talk and then moves on to the presentation of a draft idea infused with humor that “breaks the tension”. A German meeting is likelier to move more quickly to the business at hand which is the presentation of a well-formulated concept.

Perhaps the greatest communication challenge to German-American teams is the establishment a common “Streitkultur”. Americans tend to be less direct than Germans and often hesitate in bringing up negative issues. This can leave Americans insulted in interactions with Germans, while Germans can feel that issues are being skirted and their counterparts are not being entirely honest with them.

Differing Problem Solving and Decision-Making Processes - "Trial and Error" vs. "Paralysis by Analysis". Germans are often schooled in a decision analysis methodology that encourages them to generate all possible solutions, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each one based on historical research, present the reasons why all but one is unacceptable and why that remaining one is the one "True Way". Americans, on the other hand, are often quite comfortable picking a decision that appears adequate and honing the solution through trial and error. You will often hear Americans say, "Sounds good! Let's run it up the flagpole and see who salutes!" This seemingly casual approach can appear lackadaisical to Germans. Americans often feel that the longer process favored by German team members will result in the loss of business opportunities.

Differing Relationship to Time. For Germans time is a crucial organizational tool. The emphasis is to establish a pace and schedule that will result in the highest quality outcome. For Americans, time is money and speed often an end in itself. It is very difficult for Americans to understand that Germans are willing to sacrifice speed in a planned schedule or to slip delivery dates in the name of quality.

Another aspect of time that can cause German and American team members frustration is the difference in focus on the time continuum. While Germans emphasize past history and present reality, Americans work with their gaze fixed on the future. Thus the citing of historical data and current conditions form the core of a concept for Germans, whereas an inspiring vision for tomorrow guides American thinking.

Language Barrier. While a language barrier is an issue for many bicultural teams, the particular dynamics associated with German-American teams are:

- German apprehension to speak even though their English may be excellent
- German reticence in admitting the need for language support, i.e. the use of dictionaries and glossaries, off-line checking for meaning among German colleagues, etc.
- Because Germans often speak grammatically correct English with a sophisticated command of technical vocabulary specific to their area of expertise, Americans can misperceive their ability to understand spoken colloquial English. It is helpful if the message is conveyed to the Americans on the team that when English is used as a working language it is not the language of a native speaker of American English but rather the text book grammar and dictionary vocabulary

English often referred to as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Thus on a well-functioning German-American team everyone is speaking a second language -- EFL.

- Americans, being to a great degree monolingual, are often unaware of how mentally, emotionally and physically taxing working in a foreign language can be and thus unskilled at supporting their German team mates with regard to language issues.

There are many other differences that can affect team function, including leadership, the manner of goal definition and approaches to strategy, discussion of which exceeds the scope of this article.

TRANSCENDING DIFFERENCES IN INTERNATIONAL TEAMS

We will now explore the design considerations for training and organization development interventions that will move German-American teams beyond conflict and lead to their success. Many of these are relevant in other international team settings.

As training and organization development consultants who aim to foster success across borders we strongly feel that interventions should have as their overarching goal the productive functioning of the team. This means the team must be considered not only as a meeting ground for different cultural norms but rather as a holistic entity with work they need to get done.

Team members will not only bring their different cultural backgrounds to the team, but also their different personalities, organizational structures and norms and a multiplicity of other factors.

Goals for German-American Team Interventions

To achieve this goal of moving beyond the challenges to productivity it is helpful to consider specific objectives in the design. For example:

- Understanding that cultural difference exists and can play a role in the team's function.
- Discovering cultural characteristics represented within the group.
- Providing team members tools for working productively through misunderstandings as they continue to arise.
- Teaching team members how to explore the best use of their cultural breadth in accomplishing organizational goals.

- Sensitizing native speakers of English to the challenges their non-native speaking team members face in working in a second language and developing supportive group norms.
- Establishing useful virtual communication norms and expectations.
- Clarifying team goals and promoting their adoption.
- Clarifying roles within the team.
- Fostering team efficacy (the team's belief in itself to accomplish its work).

Design Process Considerations

Factors including the following can influence the design and relative success of an intervention:

- Competence of the facilitation team
- Stage of the team development
- Effectiveness of the needs assessment
- Degree of management support and participation

The Facilitation Team

The ideal qualities for a facilitation team well suited to conduct the kind of intervention under discussion include the following:

- Strong knowledge of both German and American culture
- Corporate experience in both countries and understanding of business practices in both countries
- Strong multicultural facilitation skills suitable for team process facilitation
- Grounding in organizational theory and methodology and the ability to apply this understanding creatively
- Strong theoretical and experiential grounding in intercultural communication and the ability to apply this understanding creatively
- A self-aware and comfortable biculturality allowing use of their breadth of skills in a flexible manner to best serve the needs of the client team while modeling excellent team practice

Stage of Team Development

Where in the life cycle of the team is the intervention being conducted (is the team forming, storming, norming or performing)?

Occasionally requests come from clients for interventions when the team is forming, more frequently when they are storming.

The advantage of coming in at the earlier stage is that there is generally less negative history in the team and good practices at this stage can avoid major upsets later. The disadvantage is that the team may be so upbeat that they are unable to anticipate that problems might arise in the future. Often the task at this stage is to stimulate an awareness of the possible challenges that the group may well encounter and give them the tools now to manage them as effectively and efficiently as possible when they do arise.

The advantage of coming in at the storming stage is that the team already has a keen awareness and experience of the problems they face. We believe cultural issues are best addressed so that difficulty can be transcended and the breadth of skills and inclinations the various team members' contribute are optimized. In other words, where cultural issues prevent work from getting done, the team explores them and creates solutions rather than merely being provided generic information on German-American differences. At this stage of the teams' development their effectiveness is better fostered by learning from each other as individuals rather than about each other as particular country nationals. The task at this stage is to transform negative energy into positive energy, provide skills to address the issues that exist and to foster the teams' belief in its ability to be effective.

The ideal consulting arrangement is to accompany the group with stage-appropriate interventions over time: supporting their forming, making best use of their storming, facilitating their norming and optimizing their performing.

Needs Assessment

Effective needs assessment establishes important information on team dynamics, interpersonal issues, level of cultural knowledge of the individual team members, previous relevant learning experiences (training, team work, work abroad or in a multicultural environment, etc.). It also plants the seeds for rapport and trust between the individual team members and the facilitators.

Key factors in determining the effectiveness of the needs assessment process include:

- Spoken (ideally, face-to-face) interviews rather than written surveys
- Assessment conducted in the team member's native language
- Relevant prepared questions are asked with flexibility to improvise clarifying or related questions
- Confidential (the team members' comments will influence the design but the source and particular nature of the information remain confidential).

It is important that both facilitators be present for the interviews. Reasons for this include:

- Two sets of eyes and ears can see and hear more than one set
- In this very first interaction the facilitating team already models collaborative and inclusive teamwork
- Immediate access within the facilitation team to all interview information making analysis, synthesis and application more efficient
- Appropriate representation of cultural make-up of the client team
- Guarding against fatigue: hours of straight interviewing without backup can be exhausting and compromise the quality of the interaction and retention of information

Management Support and Participation

Undoubtedly one of the most important factors determining the success of an intervention fostering the effectiveness of German-American teams is the degree of management support and participation that intervention receives.

All too often senior management hesitates to participate in such interventions, either because they do not want their presence to "interfere" with the dynamics among the team members or because of perceived time constraints.

There are at least three reasons why the participation of management is important for the process:

- the presence of senior management endorses the process as one that has political importance in the organization as a whole thus raising the perceived level of value for the team members
- as much of the system being explored as possible is "in the room" thus obviating the excuse that a particular problem cannot be solved because the relevant decision-makers are not present
- senior management rarely have an opportunity to put themselves in the role of "learner" and once given permission to do so often realize that they benefit as much if not more from the opportunity to learn new information, practice new skills and perhaps most importantly, reflect on what they and those working for them are experiencing

Wherever possible we encourage as many of the senior decision makers involved in a team's efforts to participate fully in the process, from setting objectives, to being interviewed in the needs assessment interviews, to active participation in the workshops and follow-up. This can take some persuading and even once they attend sensitive managers may want to

hold back so as not to dominate the process. We usually invite them to, as much as possible given their positions, participate freely and allow us to handle power equalization and use of airtime. We have seen that once senior management can truly give themselves over to the process, great positive movement can occur within the team. Senior managers can use this sudden freedom to discover and implement creative new solutions that shift their relationship to the work, the team and the other managers in very helpful ways.

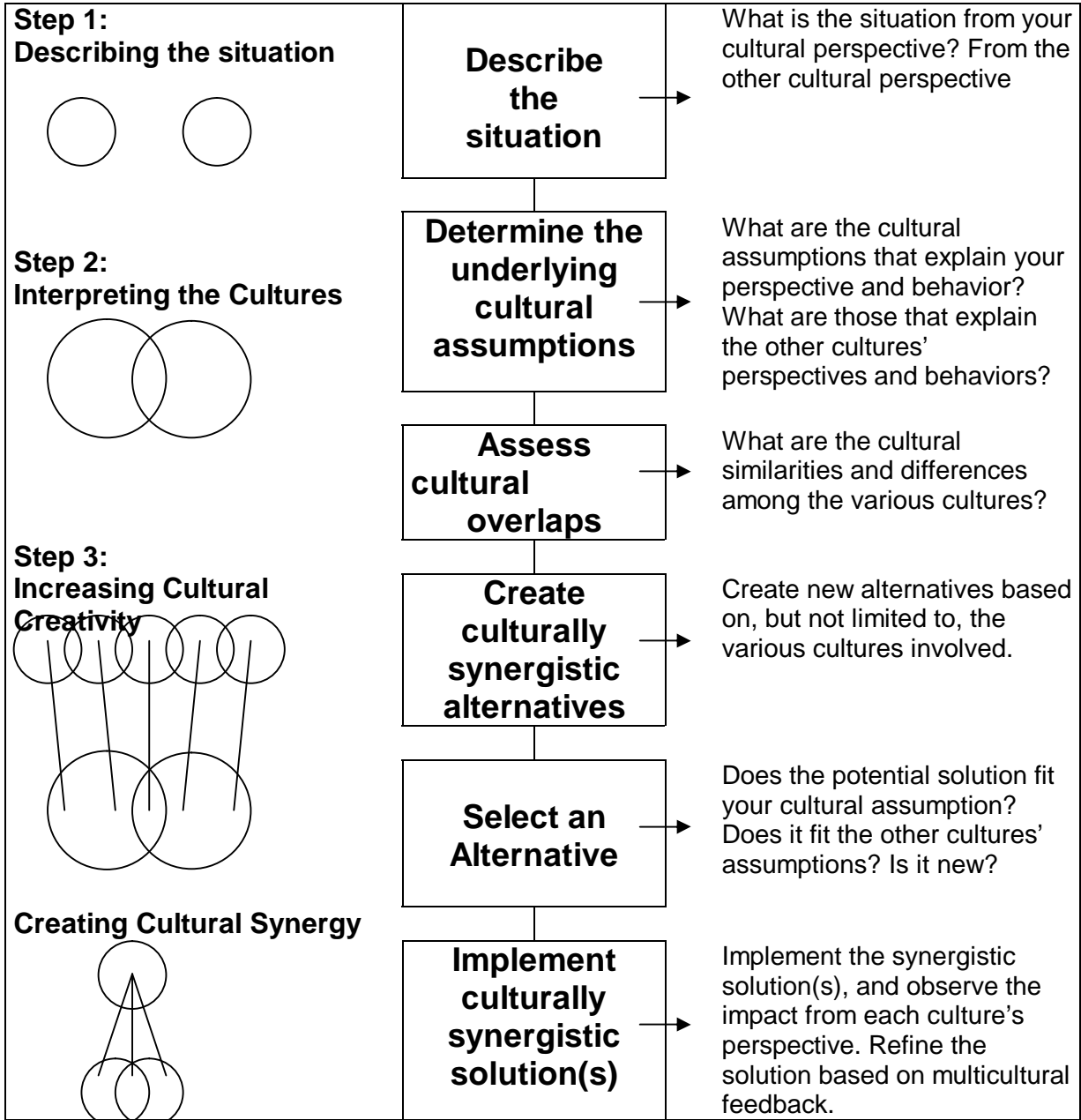
Design

It would be outside of the scope of this article to either recommend specific designs or even offer a detailed design process. Below we suggest, by way of example, one methodology for creating solutions that rather than representing “our” way or “their” way, foster innovative thinking that transcends difference to develop solutions that work for the team as a whole.

The methodology can be outlined as follows:

CREATING CULTURAL SYNERGY

Source: Reprinted from W. Warner Burke and Leonard D. Goodstein, eds. *Trends and Issues in OD: Current Theory and Practice* (San Diego: CA, 1980 University Associates)



More generally, we have found the following overarching ideas useful in our work with German-American teams.

Holism. As mentioned earlier the overarching goal of our interventions is the productive functioning of the team. To that end we attend to whatever comes up for the team, whether organizational, interpersonal, intercultural or task/work content decision-making. Often it is possible to ascertain through the pre-workshop assessment interviews the general percentage allotment of time that would best address the various issues. Just as often we see the teams evolving so quickly within the two or three day workshop that priorities and thus learning activities must be adjusted (sometimes several times in a period of a few hours!). This kind of responsive facilitation makes best use of the team's time together and considerably raises their efficacy.

Hand und Fuss (Logical Content). While we focus on the real world issues the team is facing, we provide the team with definitions, models and tools drawn from organizational development, management theory, intercultural communication and virtual work sources. The importance of providing such "Hand und Fuß" is not only because it is satisfying to those who hunger for intellectual content, but also because it provides a common vocabulary (please note that the first justification is a classically German one, the second a practical American one!).

Methodologies and Culture: Walking the Talk. The choice of learning methodologies should both accommodate the primary styles of the team members and stretch them to practice secondary ones. Being mindful of dramaturgical concerns not only bolsters the teams willingness to "try new things", but can also be used to shift energy in the group when necessary.

A power equalizing methodology we have used in German-American teams is the strategic use of Metaplan technology. Generally, the Americans have not only the language advantage but also ease with accelerated methodologies such as brainstorming. By introducing the use of the Metaplan, a reflective methodology familiar to most Germans and generally totally unknown to Americans, we have seen not only breakthroughs in problem solving, but an appreciation of the profundity of the influence the culture of communications tools has on German-American teams.

The workshop should afford the team many opportunities to have fun and build up a store of positive memories of one another. These can go a long way to increase their desire and stamina to solve problems when the going gets tough.

The Valley of Death: Layered Experiential Learning. Introduce the culture shock curve early, draw parallels with team development (forming, storming, norming, performing) and by asking for intermittent snapshot assessments of how they are feeling and where they are on the curve as a team, develop in the workshop an awareness of this process and the need for faith and patience. Be ready as facilitators to tough out the "Valley of Death" with them, providing support, but not rescuing them. Travelling "through the curve" together can be a very profound experience that will be recalled again and again and inspire the team to make it through other rough times.

Language - the Phantom Barrier. The vast majority of German-American teams work in English. Because so many Germans have such excellent knowledge of English the American team members often don't even consider the difficulties the Germans have in understanding, expressing themselves and feeling fully present in the team. And often pride makes it difficult to bring up this issue. As a result language often becomes the "phantom barrier" in these teams.

We encourage anything that allows the team to understand how difficult, exhausting and emotionally and intellectually frustrating it can be for the Germans to be working in English. An excellent tool for quickly developing this awareness is the simulation game "Redundancia" developed by Nipporica Associates and available through their website at Nipporica.com.

Also, the frequent interspersing of non-verbal energizers is helpful not only because it can revive flagging energy but because by eliminating the demand of language it provides opportunities for the German team members to express themselves and "be" on equal footing with the American team members.

Rahmenprogramm. One of the cultural differences we did not mention in the first part of this article is the differing notion of how time is spent as a team after hours. Americans tend to think of the evening structured as follows: a drink before dinner, dinner quite early (18.00 or 19.00) and then retire to one's room or go off on one's own (to the gym, answer e-mail, make phone calls, watch TV, etc.).

Germans tend to think of the evening as part of the team's time together and will generally expect to have dinner together (often after a break to freshen up or attend to personal phone calls). Dinner will start somewhat later than the Americans would expect, followed by drinks at the dinner table if the setting is conducive or a regrouping in a bar to drink and talk about "Gott und die Welt" ("God and the world") late into the evening, perhaps 23.00 or 24.00.

Uninitiated Americans do not generally understand the importance of these evenings of intellectual sparring and story telling as one of the pleasures most enjoyed by Germans and one of the key ways that their German team members would get to know and trust them (and each other). We have seen German team members not know how to interpret the "disappearance" of their American counterparts and falsely interpret it as a snub or lack of interest. It can be useful to introduce this difference during an intercultural content section of the workshop and then declare the evening as "skills practice". A morning debrief of this process can also be very instructive.

CONCLUSION

Fostering productivity in international teams is a multifaceted process that requires a sophisticated, multilayered response. Or, in the words of Russell Ackoff, "You never manage problems, you manage messes". As consultants to managers of "messes" we believe in designing training and development interventions that support them in transforming these "messes" into productive circumstances.

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