

Intercultural Competence for European Works Councils

Intercultural challenges
and solution strategies

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Introduction

„Culture is the grammar of social life“ (Dietmar Larcher, Lecture Innsbruck 2010) and influences social coexistence – whether in governmental or non-governmental institutions or in national or multinational enterprises.

It is commonly acknowledged that social structures are no longer culturally homogeneous and that intercultural reality brings along new challenges. However, it is much less clear how these challenges are to be met exactly.

The cooperation of people with different cultural backgrounds brings along an intersection that can be described as intercultural. In this intersection, rules, standards and also values have to be renegotiated. Since every individual has to be willing to step back from accustomed and established behaviour patterns, practical intercultural is often a hard way.

Intercultural cooperation requires the ability to observe, reflect and change. Acting and thinking

interculturally should reach beyond recognizing specific national characteristics and should lead to cross-cultural problem-solving skills. This manual outlines how this could look like in the work of European Works Councils (EWC).

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

“It was quite a long process for us all to become aware that these cultural differences exist. For a long time I thought that everybody understands what I am saying and that I understand what the others say.

Only after some time I realised that these cultural differences exist – due to various examples that helped me noticing these differences.”

*Doris Vymazal,
EWC at TNT*

Structure of the manual

This intercultural manual attempts to provide support for the practical work of European Works Councils on different levels. Based on short descriptions of the theoretical backgrounds, the resulting challenges for the practice are being presented.

Interviews with four EWC members constitute the basis for the respective explanations. Parts of these interviews are quoted in this manual and support the de-

scriptions of the actual intercultural challenges in EWC bodies as well as the role of the EWC in the company.

Strategies and answers are presented on the basis of three areas. The reflections constitute the basis for raising intercultural consciousness and create an understanding for useful interventions. The section recommendations provides advice for the adaptation of the own behaviour. Several chapters

introduce different aspects of the practical EWC work. Models of cultural theory justify the selection of these aspects and describe fields that from an intercultural perspective are regarded as sensitive areas.

A general final chapter concludes and completes the recommendations for the practice.

Objective of the manual

The objective of the manual is to sensitise EWC delegates for cultural differences arising in the EWC work.

This manual should provide a tool for dealing with intercultural issues particularly in trainings aiming at the development of intercultural competence for EWC members. A combination of theoretical perspectives and ideas for practical solution strategies should reinforce

the willingness for experiments and breaking new ground. Besides practical recommendations intended for the immediate practice, reflection questions should at the same time encourage to (re) think and to observe. Also intercultural situations are partly determined by the personality of the individual actors. These personal elements increase the complexity. Therefore, recommendations for the practice always have to be

adapted to the specific situation. It is an aim of this intercultural manual to develop this capacity.

The objective is to develop of a broad capacity to successfully act in intercultural situations. Therefore, everybody is invited to experimentalise, reflect and discuss.

What is intercultural competence?

Intercultural competence can be regarded as the key capacity of EWC work. It includes social, emotional and strategic capacities which – due to the different cultural backgrounds of the actors – are getting increasingly complex. At the same time, it is the purpose and the challenge of intercultural cooperation to cope with this increased complexity.

The persons involved need knowledge of the possible backgrounds of the culturally influenced behaviour as well as personal abilities enabling them to respond to their

counterpart in an open and empathetic way. Acquiring “ambiguity tolerance” is of central importance. Social abilities complete intercultural competence and can guarantee that the persons involved also communicate in critical situations.

The willingness to figure out the different point of views and to analyse the resulting challenges for the cooperation is another major aspect of intercultural competence. In doing so, one can resort to culture-specific knowledge. This knowledge constitutes a ba-

sis of intercultural competence, but does not lead to intercultural competence automatically. The reflection of own values and the values of others is also a necessary requirement.

**Ambiguity tolerance is the ability to notice and to stand up to contradictions (culturally determined differences that seem difficult to understand or unacceptable).*

Why do EWC members need intercultural competence?

The role of EWC members has numerous aspects and implies intercultural issues on different levels. EWC members represent employees of multinationally acting companies.

Among other things, this is also shown in the composition of the company personnel. Consequently, concerns submitted to the EWC are more and more frequently

matters arising from the different cultural backgrounds of executives or employees.

Corresponding examples will be outlined in greater detail in this manual. Besides the tasks of the EWC in the company, networking and cooperation in transnational EWC bodies constitute intercultural challenges. The historical backgrounds of the national work

of works councils shape the self-understanding of the individual EWC members.

It definitely is a task of intercultural dimension to deal with these differences and to come up with goals that acknowledge the culturally shaped ideas of the individual members.

How can intercultural competence be trained?

It is a common fallacy of intercultural practice that intercultural experience more or less automatically leads to intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence is an ability that can only develop through specifically dealing with emerging challenges. Intercultural training programmes can make cultural aspects of human actions tangible.

Different methods of cultural sensitisation allow opening up critical areas of intercultural cooperation. In intercultural coaching teams or individuals are being accompanied directly in their practice and are being supported in dealing with emerging challenges.

By this means, the intercultural dimension of own actions and the actions of others can be experienced in a better way, thus

supporting the development of synergies.

Openness, cultural sensitivity and mutual respect constitute the basis for cooperation and are being trained by specific measures.



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

“We succeeded to organise training for the EWC focussing on this interculturality and intercultural management.

Since that training we have realised that the solidarity is much stronger and that the participation of the individual members has improved – although we have a clear understanding that we permanently have to work on this.”

*Ingrid Stipanovsky
EWC at Novartis*

Theoretical perspectives



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"In the European Works Council it has happened to me that I have asked a question and I have always just got any answer and not the answer I have expected or that seemed appropriate.

And eventually you say that you don't need to go on asking because it's useless. If I ask a question and I get an evasive answer than I know that I don't need to ask again after the third time."

*Alois Schlager
EWC in the
Fiat-Group*

Language is THE key communication tool. It is commonly known that communication involves far more than the mere transmission of the content of a conversation. Non-verbal messages do play a role as well as systems that determine how to deal with hierarchies in discussions.

In a subjective assessment these systems indicate how long a contribution of a conversation partner can last until it is regarded to be impolite, boring or pretentious. All these things happen unconsciously and are culturally coloured. Whether messages are being transmitted more or less

directly, also depends on the importance of social relations within a culture. In individualistically oriented cultures messages are rather being transmitted directly and an emphasis is put on objectivity. The speakers assume that things are received as they have been said. If a culture attaches great importance to community, also the communication style is affected.

In order to protect the status of an individual within the group, critical content is being communicated indirectly and in a figurative, paraphrasing way. Persons with a direct communication style

can perceive this way to speak as inconvenient and evasive and may possibly react impatiently. In return, persons with an indirect communication style can perceive direct communication as impolite or harsh.

Communicating in a language other than one's mother tongue exacerbates the danger of misunderstandings and requires increased sensitivity.

The aspect of communication in the role of the EWC in the company

The encounter of culturally determined direct and indirect communication styles can cause misunderstandings and tensions in many areas.

During the interviews it became obvious that the multinational composition of the company personnel can bring about several challenges for EWC members.

Thus, disagreements due to different communication styles can arise within the teams as well as in the relations between the management and the team. If these disagreements escalate, the regarding issues should be addressed within the EWC.

Difficulties arising from different communication styles range from

disagreements over work orders to the communication of codes of conduct to different negotiation techniques.

The aspect of communication in the EWC body

Also within EWC bodies communication is a central tool of cooperation. Also there challenges arise due to different communication styles varying from direct to indirect.

These differences can become obvious in formulating requests and questions to management, for instance. Also the question of

whether and how answers are being interpreted is an aspect of intercultural communication.

Language barriers resulting from communication in a language other than one's mother tongue or from translations exacerbate communication. Due to limited time resources for working together face-to-face, EWC bodies often use

other forms of communication. Especially in virtual communication intercultural misunderstandings cannot be ruled out and can even be more difficult to detect and to solve.

Reflections on communication styles

For successful communication across national and cultural borders it is important not only to observe the communication style of the counterpart but also to think about the parameters influencing the own mode of speaking. Sharpening this observation skill constitutes the basis of reflection.

The following questions may encourage this:

- How are contributions distributed in a meeting?
- What happens in the breaks between the meetings? In what form does informal exchange take place?
- How much emphasis is put on politeness? How is this shown?
- What influence does non-native communication have on the conversation situation?
- Which emotional reactions can be observed? Which situations lead to emotional reactions?
- What happens if somebody puts forward a concern in an expansive and figurative way?
- How much humour is "allowed" in the meetings?
- How do the different members evaluate conversation successes?
- Are there differences in the use of the I-form and the we-form?

Interventions and training proposals

In order to ensure successful intercultural communication it is necessary that all persons involved are prepared to adjust their habitual communication style to the intercultural context and to respond to each other.

Regarding communication this means that direct as well as indirect communication styles are supposed to be regarded as equal. Intercultural trainings can be helpful to train the consciousness for the intercultural nuances of com-

munication. The participants are encouraged to experiment with the respective other communication style by means of specific exercises. In this way, the participants broaden their repertory and increase their tolerance towards other communication styles.

In the course of EWC meetings the involvement of all conversation partners can be encouraged and accustomed communication patterns can be broken up by specifically targeted methods of mo-

deration (e.g. "Open Space"*). Anonymously writing down concerns or the possibility of written feedback can make it easier for participants with an indirect communication style to contribute ideas.

**"Open Space" is a method of moderation for larger groups that should stimulate an open exchange.*

Recommendations: Communication

Experimenting with other communication styles can make it easier to understand the counterpart and can broaden the own repertory of communication strategies.

Persons with a direct communication style communicating with persons with an indirect communication style should keep in mind the following:

- Pay attention to potential alternative meanings and indirect references.
- Tolerate free room in the meetings.
- Accept it, if participants exercise restraint.
- Make use of breaks in between the meetings for informal conversations.

Persons with an indirect communication style should keep in mind:

- Dare to speak out your opinion.
- Try to stick to the agenda and the time structure.
- Do not read too much between the lines.
- Prepare yourself for the meetings and express requests and concerns clearly.



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"We intensely work with 'Open Space'. This counters the reservation to openly address things in the group. In the 'Open Space' you walk around and decide where to go. Although everybody has to go everywhere, we have the possibility to walk around together with persons we know better and where we rather dare to say what we think.

Afterwards this is collected and anonymised. Such things are very helpful."

*Doris Vymazal
EWC at TNT*

THE ASPECT OF LEADERSHIP

The aspect of leadership



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

“... in the execution of directives you again and again notice that persons have very different approaches to specific processes. When it comes to working relationships, frequently the works council comes into play – especially relating to the treatment of employees by superiors.”

When persons are evaluated during performance appraisals the cultural background of the respective person gets important and occasionally leads to conflict situations.”

*Ingrid Stipanovsky
EWC at Novartis*

The leadership styles applied in the company but also in the EWC body are not only determined by the personality of leading individuals. In most cases the roots of a company also influence the organisational culture and are shown in the values and standards shaping the professional environment.

Besides the national background of a company also the branch of industry can substantially determine the organisational culture. Thereby, the necessity to think beyond national cultural dimensions becomes obvious. The same is true for the other aspects outlined in this manual.

In order to grasp different leadership styles, culture models illustrate them by means of extremes. They reach from hierarchical to egalitarian approaches. In the practice of leadership this cultural dimension – also described as power distance – can show itself in many different shades. In companies propagating equality work orders are more frequently handed over to project teams that have to organise themselves autonomously.

Hierarchical leadership styles tend to a greater centralisation that can show itself in decision-making processes as well as a clearly regulated information

chain. Employees approving of hierarchical leadership styles accept decisions made by higher management and frequently show a strong loyalty towards the company.

The aspect of leadership in the role of the EWC in the company

The interviews with EWC members clearly showed that the different cultural backgrounds of the employees can lead to numerous intercultural challenges that – amongst other fields – can be seen in performance appraisals and performance management.

Different perceptions of the performance evaluation can provoke strong emotional reactions and turn into a problem that may also

have to be solved by EWC members.

If employees have a cultural background in which criticism is rather communicated in an indirect way (e.g. in written form or via third persons), they can feel offended by direct and personal confrontation. Performance and talent management – as pursued in US-American business practice – can give employees at a European

company location the impression that personal abilities are not being given enough attention and that they are being evaluated excessively on the basis of measurable performance goals.

Debating over these issues can be part of the EWC agenda.

The aspect of leadership in the EWC body

Intercultural aspects of leadership also influence the cooperation within the EWC bodies.

The notion of leadership of the individual members shapes the understanding on how the EWC body should function and how the different roles are to be fulfilled. The task to turn these bodies into well-working units within the li-

imited time available for direct cooperation is described as a great challenge. Different notions of leadership can exacerbate cooperation.

Questions like the amount of responsibility tied to the role of the chairman/chairwoman or the equal distribution of fields of responsibility within the working

group have an intercultural dimension. Furthermore, the question how actively delegates participate in the EWC body or the working groups can be related to the notion of leadership.

Reflections on leadership styles

As outlined within the aspects of communication styles, it is also important to sharpen the observation skills regarding the cultural aspects of leadership of all persons involved. Questions that can encourage the observation and the involvement with the topic concern fields like:

In the company:

- Which values characterise the organisational culture?
- Do the values outlined in the mission statement correspond to the cultural values of the company location?

- Which expectations do executives have in relation to the performance orientation of their employees?
- How is performance assessed and how often is it addressed?

Within the EWC bodies:

- Do the individual members expect that one person clearly assumes the leading role and directs the work of the group?
- How much do the individual delegates participate in the working groups?
- Are groups formed along national lines or are there persons that outline the opinion of various members?

- Does the role description in the rules of order correspond to the understanding of the delegates?

Interventions and training proposals

The involvement with cultural influences on leadership behaviour can be encouraged on the basis of the described observations tasks. The theoretical understanding of the backgrounds of different leadership strategies provides the basis for comprehension and intervention.

In EWC bodies and working groups it is important to attach great importance to the clarification

of common goals and tasks. Defining a common working method may take up a lot of time in the beginning, but is nevertheless an important basis for common progress.

In the process of dealing with this issue – in which external moderation can be of great help – the individual delegates should have the opportunity to openly outline their ideas about the different roles

and their realisation. Simulations or working with case studies are methods that can be applied in trainings and that can shine a light on the intercultural dimensions of issues regarding leadership.

These methods facilitate the disclosure of tensions that are difficult to address in practice and thus strengthen the mutual understanding.

Recommendations: Leadership

The consciousness for different leadership concepts enables persons with different cultural backgrounds to reconsider and adapt their own leadership style.

The following recommendations can be helpful. For persons with high aspirations to equality:

- Communicate your expectations in a structured and “well-dosed” way.

- Leave enough room for intermediate consultations and arising questions.
- Spend enough time on the coordination of activities and remain visible as a leading person.
- Always address the individual members directly.

For persons preferring clear roles and organisation:

- Be proactive and do not wait for being asked for a contribution in the discussion.
- Dare to ask questions and to show curiosity.



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

“I think, that the work of works councils on a European level is very important and is becoming more and more important. I am deeply convinced that it is necessary to position employees against multinational companies as equal conversation partners.

And it is part of this that a group can work together well, that the members feel strong and that they make the most out of the short time they meet.”

*Doris Vymazal
EWC at TNT*

THE ASPECT OF CONFLICT

Theoretical perspectives



Conflicts are situation in which apparently incompatible points of view meet. There is no need to further explain that there are enough diverging opinions also in the EWC work. The relevant question that should be outlined in this manual is: Which intercultural dimensions within these conflicts can be observed?

At first, two major aspects can be spotted in an analysis of a conflict: reasons for a conflict and conflict behaviour. Both components have an intercultural dimension. The importance of certain fields of work

or issues for the individual persons involved is indeed culturally influenced and determines the backgrounds leading to a conflict. Some may judge an argument as an objective debate, while others may perceive the same situation as a personal attack. Furthermore, also conflict behaviour is very much influenced by culture.

Differences that can be observed refer to the person's demeanour in the event of conflict and the assessment of solution strategies. Whether a conflict is openly dealt within the group or whether this is

done in the back parlour and the question at what moment interventions are regarded to be appropriate can differ considerably from culture to culture. It is part of the intercultural learning process to develop sensitivity for the nuances of conflict.

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"You have to deal with the countries' different cultures of discussion. For example: The French and the Italians gone on strike first and talk afterwards. The employers have the same understanding: First of all, the employees should take up actions and then we see how much support they have got among colleagues and only then we talk.

This is a huge difference to Austria. We have got strong co-determination rights and therefore we often look for solutions in long negotiations."

The aspect of conflict in the role of the EWC in the company

Different national traditions in the representation of interests of employees can lead to EWC members and bodies being confronted with multiple expectations.

Furthermore, employees can have different visions on what they are entitled to or which working conditions seem appropriate. These different approaches can on the one hand influence the relation-

ship of an EWC member to his/her colleagues, but on the other hand also have an impact on to relationship between the EWC and management. If the concepts differ strongly, conflicts are bound to occur.

How these conflicts are dealt with can again differ due to cultural backgrounds. When and whether management tries to establish

contact in critical situations and whether and how long issues are being negotiated together can be very different from country to country and do not only constitute a challenge within a company.

The aspect of conflict in the EWC body

Different concepts about the tasks of the EWC and the cooperation with the management represent a challenge for the direct practice of the EWC bodies. These different concepts come into the open especially in crisis situations.

Evaluating when escalations scenarios are to be called into action and which interventions are most appropriate in the res-

pective situation are examples for such conflict situations. Different approaches to the work of the EWC are emphasised by cultural perspectives.

While employee representatives in countries with a conflict-oriented trade union tradition tend to go public with actions as soon as tensions arise, employee representatives in countries favouring

social partnership may call for intensive negotiations with management as a promising strategy. Dealing with these different approaches constitutes a challenge for the practice of the EWC and requires high intercultural conflict resolution skills of the individual members.

Reflections on conflict styles

The emotionality coming into play during conflicts represents a particular challenge in the development of (intercultural) conflict resolution skills. These emotions do not only complicate the introduction of solution strategies but also partially obstruct the analytical skills of the persons involved. However, these analytical skills make up the basis for the development of an observation skill that permits a conflict behaviour adapted to an intercultural environment.

- In which situations do conflicts most frequently occur according to experience?
- What exactly happens in this conflict situation?
- Which different reactions can be observed?
- Is there an agreement about the occurring of a conflict?
- Is the building of groups being strengthened in the conflict situation?
- Is the conflict addressed openly?
- Which emotions come up in-

side me? Are these emotions new or familiar?

- When do particular members withdraw completely from the discussion?
- Which persons are suited to mediate in the conflict situation?



Interventions and training proposals

If conflicts do not only include different points of view but also different cultures, the situation becomes more complex and the finding of constructive solutions becomes more difficult. Trainings in intercultural conflict resolution skills – ideally in real groups – can be used to discuss and establish common rules in conflict.

Understanding different assessments and approaches to conflicts can be addressed in the training as well as wishes and expecta-

tions of the individual members concerning the behaviour in conflict situations. Settling such rules in advance can make agreements in the case of conflict easier. Mediation techniques like mirroring* or reframing** are methods that can be learned in training.

Due to the power of emotions appearing in intercultural conflict situations, it is necessary to practise these techniques. These methods can only be used when necessary if they become part of the behavi-

our of the persons involved.

**Mirroring implies repeating what has been said to the speaker without any assessment.*

***Reframing implies rephrasing negative statements in a positive way in order to encourage a change of perspective.*

Recommendations: Conflict

The group dynamics within EWC bodies can be seen as an important indicator for existing conflict resolution skills.

If consolidated coalitions that partially run along national lines break up, new potentials for the development of a common sense of identity arise that constitute a fundamental basis for collectively overcoming conflict situations as a group.

- Use moderations techniques to break up gridlocked group set-ups.
- Always call for “time-outs” for informal exchange in small groups.
- Regularly provide a “trend barometer” in order to reveal tensions as soon as possible.
- Agree upon rules for conflict solution prior to possible conflicts.

- Work on example cases and conflict scenarios together in order to reinforce mutual understanding.

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

“We have created instruments to argue out disagreements. In the works council agreements there are so-called arbitration boards for evaluation procedures and there we take a lot of time to uncover intercultural differences in order to come to a good solution for both sides.”

*Ingrid Stipanovsky
EWC at Novartis*

THE ASPECT OF RELATIONSHIP



Theoretical perspectives

The significance of social relations in a society and how these relations are defined in a culture has crucial impacts on professional cooperation. The relation of individuals to society is shown in individualistic or collectivistic value orientations. In individualistically oriented cultures the well-being of the individual is placed above the well-being of the group.

This is already shown in education: Children are encouraged to form a personal opinion and to self-confidently represent this opi-

nion in the group. They learn to argue from a personal perspective and to make their point. Collectivistic value orientations have a high appraisal of abilities that consolidate the group and ensure the well-being of the group.

The concerns of the group are placed above the interests of the individual and are only communicated to the outside after an opinion has been consolidated within the group and are then presented as common concerns of the group. Collectivistic concepts sup-

port the formation of groups that can be perceived as an obstacle for the development of relationships by individualistically oriented persons.

Individualistic and collectivistic value orientations influence how team work is defined and put into practice and how much room social relations take up in professional contexts.

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"The varying distance in body language is a difficult field in intercultural connections.

It took me long to understand why so many unexpected conflicts arise and that this has a lot to do with proximity and distance, especially between men and women. This is a very complex field."

*Doris Vymazal
EWC at TNT*

The aspect of relationship in the role of the EWC in the company

Relationships are part of the professional life and are therefore also a relevant issue for the work of the EWC in the company. Cultural relationship concepts influence the expectations of employees from the employers.

The more individualistic a society is organised, the more self-responsibility is conferred on the employees or separated from the relationship between the employee and the employer respectively.

Hence, protection mechanisms have a higher significance than in collectivistic societies where these mechanisms are more tied to the decisions of the corresponding executives.

As a consequence, employees with a collectivistic cultural background tend to be personally more committed to their employer which can be expressed by a greater loyalty towards the employer although this loyalty stems from

the desire for job security. It can also be an issue of EWC work to develop standards guaranteeing the job security of the employees while acknowledging cultural values and differences.

The aspect of relationship in the EWC body

Trustful relationships between the EWC delegates constitute the basis for productive cooperation. Building sustainable relationships across national and cultural borders is an undertaking that needs time and continuity.

These two requirements are a challenge in EWC bodies. In the interviews it became obvious that time for direct cooperation is very limited and that the group addi-

tionally has to deal with considerable fluctuations. The building of groups along national but also linguistic lines can only be broken up partially in the short time of directly working together. Uncertainties in dealing with each other do not only appear in the meetings but also during the informal time spent together.

The uncertainty, for instance, relates to particular cultural features

concerning forms of politeness and the choosing of conversation topics.

Unconscious aspects like the physical distance can irritate individual members and influence the development of a common sense of identity.

Reflections on relationship styles

Culturally influenced relationship concepts usually control the actual relationship in an indirect and unconscious way. These aspects can be identified through conscious involvement and observation.

- How do individual delegates formulate questions and concerns? Do they place value on formal or informal presentations?
- Are there obvious signs of relationship orientation like the varying use of the I-form and the we-form?
- How strongly are professional and private issues being separated?
- How do the individual members show their personal feelings, for instance, regarding physical distance when speaking?
- What do the individual members do in the breaks between the meetings? Do they prefer to rest together with the group or do they want to have their 'peace'?
- Are groups being built? If yes, what is done to break them up?
- How can one recognise the developing trust into each other?
- What importance does politeness have for the individual members and how is this politeness shown?
- Do the individual members share a feeling of 'collegiality' and solidarity?



Interventions and training proposals

The aim of interventions in the field of culturally influenced relationship concepts definitely is the creation of trust within EWC bodies and within the companies. Attempts to break up existing borders reinforced by language barriers and nationality strengthen solidarity within the group.

The creation of a common sense of identity contributes to the purpose that diversity is no longer regarded as separating but

as enriching. This process can be accelerated through different measures.

Abstaining from translations and interpretations in certain work meetings can give priority to the relationship level and thus strengthen the relationships at a personal level (see quote). Holding a strategy workshop opens up the possibility to work on a common vision. Team coaching can contribute to strengthening

the working capacity of the intercultural group and can support the process of building trust.

Exercises in question techniques can encourage the openness to approach others and to get involved with new ideas in an unbiased way.

Recommendations: Relationship

Tolerance and respecting differences are significant indicators for the acceptance of different relationship concepts.

Recommendations for persons with an individualistic relationship orientation:

- Test different body distances and observe how you feel.
- Leave enough room for informal conversations.
- Use the "Ice Breaker" or "loosening-up exercises" to get to know each other.
- Reflect on your own expectations in relation to appreciation.
- If appropriate: Express compliments in front of other persons.

For persons attaching importance to community:

- Observe closely how others react to physical proximity.
- Do not take objective discussion personally and try to go on discussing with the person.

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"Before we established an EWC at CASE IH we formed a preparation group for the negotiations and said: 'We don't need interpreters.'

We then talked with our hands and feet and this triggered of such a dynamics that we got along very well together and that we immediately launched a Europe-wide campaign."

*Alois Schlager
EWC in the
Fiat-Group*

THE ASPECT OF WORKING STYLES



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"I have made the experience that in a multinational company you always have to specifically demand the (economic, organisational, structural) information you need in order to represent your colleagues well. I also have a vote in the supervisory board. It was necessary to write an official letter in order to get all information in the required form to which the supervisory board would be legally entitled to. I learned from this also for the EWC: Employee representatives have to be exactly informed about their rights according to the agreement and the law (directive) in order to claim these rights. Legal rights you don't claim are dead."

Theoretical perspectives

Different working styles complicate the cooperation of intercultural working groups. These different working styles manifest themselves, for instance, in different valuations of writtenness that may express itself in different approaches to written material like minutes or contracts.

Cultures attaching great importance to writtenness place more value on the exact documentation of processes and in many cases also have established routines. In cultures rather trusting in oral ag-

reements the insisting on written forms of documentation can be seen as a sign of lacking confidence and thus put the relationship within the working group at risk. Herein, the scepticism of the ones comes into conflict with the insistence of the others who regard writtenness as a part of professionalism.

Reservations against written material can be regarded as obstructing processes. Different relationship concepts can reinforce this process. Sub-groups with collecti-

vistic norms may need more room for the consolidation of common strategies in the group and feel driven into a corner by written commitments.

Also during virtual cooperation it is absolutely necessary to keep cultural approaches to working styles in mind. Preferences or rejections of specific communication methods can be a reason for the reservation of individual delegates.

The aspect of working styles in the role of the EWC in the company

Different working styles lead to particular challenges in the role of the EWC in the company. A different valuation of writtenness shows itself in the approach to contracts that plays an important role in industrial relations.

Different opinions about the question which aspects are to be stipulated by contracts can also become relevant for the EWC. Especially if management is staf-

fed by international personnel, it cannot be automatically assumed that there exists a common understanding.

Ideas about the preferred working styles within the company are also questions that become important in the leadership of employees and that can lead to misunderstandings. Lacking understanding for the intercultural dimension of working styles – reinforced by

a different prioritisation in the school education of the different countries – can particularly lead to tensions in the area of performance management that require mediation on behalf of the EWC.

The aspect of working styles in the EWC body

In the EWC body the following fields that trace back to different working styles can be outlined.

As stressed earlier before the different valuation of writtenness might require a process that settles a common working method. The intercultural dimension has to be taken into consideration also in the rules of order that in principle should contribute to the clarification of internal processes. It is necessary to find the right ba-

lance between flexibility and stipulation of working methods and processes useful for cooperation. The members assess these agreements differently, depending on their orientation in regard to the working styles.

While the ones regard clear arrangements as a basis for working professionally, the others can perceive this as a limitation and react reserved.

Furthermore, working styles have a time dimension and influence long-term schedules and the expectations concerning the adherence to these plans.

Reflections on working styles

How can different working styles influenced by cultural backgrounds be discussed in the working group or the EWC body? Frequently repeating discussions on the exactness of working methods and frequently expressed discontent of individual members concerning this matter are an indication for these differences.

The following questions can be used for sensibilisation:

- Have the rules of order been settled by a major consensus?
 - What about the adherence to these agreements?
 - What happens if agreements are not adhered to?
 - What importance does written documentation have for the individual members?
 - Are there differences and how are these differences handled?
 - How exact are plans and how exactly are these plans put into practice?
- Are there frustrations and disagreements concerning this matter?
 - In which situations do the individual delegates communicate in written or oral form? What are the reasons?



Interventions and training proposals

Clearly defined arrangements about working methods are absolutely essential for intercultural cooperation. It is important to focus on the definition of common goals rather than dealing with differences. If there is trust in the group, it is usually also easier to handle differences.

Different approaches include resources that enrich cooperation. Basis for that is, on the one hand, orienting towards a common goal

and, on the other hand, dealing with the strengths and potentials of the individual members.

Different tools from the field of team development – like identifying team roles – can be particularly useful in intercultural contexts in two respects: In the first place, identifying different strengths reinforces mutual respect.

In the second place, recognising the special skills of an

individual person supports them to place their own skills at the disposal of the group.

**Team roles according to Belbin: He describes 8 team roles that exist in every team and that allow for efficient cooperation.*

Recommendations: Working styles

Appreciation and respect for each other should be established as the ethos of the group. It should be evaluated whether the members regularly take care about this ethos.

Recommendations for persons placing great value on writtenness:

- Also communicate orally when passing on written material.

- Ensure that persons who prefer to communicate orally also get the possibility to do so.
- Regularly redistribute the role of the moderator.
- At best, write the minutes immediately and visible for all members (beamer).

Persons favouring oral agreements

- Do not judge the insistence on contracts as a vote of no confidence.
- Try to reduce your rejection of written texts and look for appropriate means to contribute.
- Make concrete proposals for oral forms of cooperation.

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"Things that also have a major impact are questions like: How does get group get organised? What importance do minutes have? What importance do written notes have? For which colleagues is it of major importance what's written in the minutes? The English or Dutch, for instance, have a very formal approach to written documents and the documentation of what has been done. Austrians don't have such an approach at all; they rather work by handshake and dialogue – at least that's how I experience it."

*Doris Vymazal
EWC at TNT*



QUOTE from INTERVIEW

“One person comes into my mind as an example for intercultural competence. This colleague led a big team and I liked the way he did this. He took his time. He patiently dedicated himself to others and was interested in the working methods of his staff members. And he complied with the feedback rules not judging everything immediately, but making proposals und offers: What do you need from me in order to make things better? For me one of the most important concerns in intercultural processes is to deal with the other persons and not to judge immediately.”

*Ingrid Stipanovsky
EWC at Novartis*

Intercultural competence as a basic attitude

Culture can be described as the orientation guide that controls social coexistence and that makes it easier for the members of a society to orient themselves in the jungle of social rules. These rules differ according to cultural backgrounds mixing more and more due to globalisation.

Intercultural competence is no individual ability that can be learned by codes of conduct. Instead, it is an attitude involving the willingness to approach persons

with other values in an open and respectful way. Therefore, recommendations can be useful to avoid cultural blunders.

But essentially the training of intercultural competence should focus on reflecting the underlying attitudes behind and understanding situations in their complexity. The facts that culture and personality cannot be considered separately from each other and that intercultural situations influence each other complicate dealing with

intercultural issues. The own conduct is to be considered as well the conduct of the respective counterpart.

The reactions of the counterpart allow for noticing and questioning cultural phenomena taken for granted.

Intercultural competence as a subject for development

Intercultural cooperation in working groups and the EWC bodies as experienced by EWC delegates within their tasks is a challenge with potential.

If persons with different cultural backgrounds aim at achieving common goals, these situations offer potentials for development on many different levels. Studies on the working capacity of intercultural teams prove that cooperation

in culturally mixed groups demands more from the group members. Many things that seem “normal” and self-evident for an individual have to be renegotiated and re-discussed. If the persons succeed in getting involved in this process, unimagined possibilities for development will come along.

These possibilities appear as learning processes for the individual

that question self-evidences and reveal new paths.

In these learning processes the own communication strategies are expanded, the conflict resolution skills are strengthened and leadership methods are used in a more conscious und more targeted way.

Intercultural competence as synergy potential

Intercultural competence can be described as the ability to regard differences in behaviour and thinking not as an opposition to the own self-understanding but as a broadening of the own horizon.

The underlying reason for intercultural problems arising in social as well as professional everyday life is the fact that differences make people feel insecure and that they perceive differences as an attack. This insecurity manifests itself in

prejudices obstructing cooperation and – in a much more trivial form – in stubbornness, bossiness and not taking people seriously. Accepting differences is the basis for productive cooperation. Taking notice of these differences and encouraging the individual members to deal with them in an open way allows for the development of synergies.

An attitude allowing and encouraging diversity is the basis for the-

se synergies. This willingness to diversity should be reflected in all areas of cooperation and should create an environment encouraging a willingness to change.

Create common goals

The more diverse the difference in thinking and acting, all the more important is the conscious development of common grounds. The common concern for a balanced company management preserving the employees' interests is an important common ground in the work of European Works Councils.

Giving top priority to this common ground and also calling it in mind in critical situations can represent a central pillar of cooperation. Even if differences in working

methods and approaches that are perceived to be obstacles appear in the daily business of EWC work, it is useful to place the uniting goal as the common ground above the separating differences.

In fact, differences can be explored as possible paths under the sign of solidarity, if the differences are admitted and allowed in an environment of mutual respect. Goals and values as important elements of a common vision should precede the discussion on standards and rules as in the rules

of order. Innovative methods of moderation can help the persons involved to think outside the box and to meet the challenge of new forms of cooperation.



Respect, appreciation & Co

Respect and mutual appreciation – besides several other abilities in the field of personality – can be seen as the mainstay of intercultural cooperation. Intercultural competence is no special competence in a strict sense.

Everybody has abilities that she/he can make use of, if these abilities are recognised as resources. Interest, tolerance but also flexibility can be quoted as examples. Social abilities – like

the openness to communicatively approach others – are talents that can be used. A profile of abilities giving information on existing potentials could already be used in the stage of composition of the EWC in order to recognise the intercultural abilities of future EWC members.

Tools like the IRC* can also be used in direct cooperation in order to draw the attention of the members to their abilities and to

encourage them to use these abilities more frequently when working together.

**IRC: Intercultural Readiness Check is a tool to recognise intercultural abilities and potentials for development.*

Make it possible to address cultural aspects

Dealing with cultural differences is a challenge for two reasons:

In the first place, people are rather unaware of the influences of their own cultural background. Although behaviour is always culturally determined, the reasons for somebody to communicate in a specific way are primarily attributed to personality.

In the second place, besides recognising these cultural aspects, it is also a challenge to address them.

Even though people are aware of these differences, it is difficult to address them in a constructive way when working together. Dealing with the functioning of culture in a collective and general

way – like done in intercultural training – promotes intercultural awareness and serves as a basis for cooperation that goes beyond the listing of distinctive cultural features and the conveying of simple recipes.

QUOTE from INTERVIEW

"It is essential to leave behind certain prejudices and to look for things in common: Where do we want to go? What is important to us? If you take this seriously, you say: 'This is our common goal. This is the agreement and we now want to put it into practice. This is the best solution.' Only after having discussed this, we pull together."

*Ingrid Stipanovsky
EWC at Novartis*



Recommendations for intercultural action

Be willing to take risks!

Intercultural cooperation rests upon the willingness of all partners to question their own point of views and assumptions.

Be self-critical!

The own culture is usually the most frequently ignored culture. It is difficult to take a look at the own self. We frequently comment on other cultures, but do not reflect on our own culture.

Be patient!

Intercultural cooperation needs time and patience. Many questions must be clarified before starting to work together.

Be creative!

There are no simple recipes for dealing with cultural differences. You must learn to meld observations and reflections into a meaningful whole.

Be flexible!

There will be situations in which you have to step back from your own behaviour patterns. If you are willing to try out new things, new possibilities for cooperation will emerge.

Be sociable!

Creating a basis of trust is a fundamental pillar of intercultural cooperation. Use your social abilities and openly approach others.

Be eager to try out new things!

Even if things do not always work out the way you have imagined, it is important to go on together and to try out new things.



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