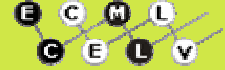




**ICOPROMO**

Intercultural competence for professional mobility  
*Compétence interculturelle pour le développement  
de la mobilité professionnelle*



## **INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR MULTICULTURAL TEAMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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### **Background**

Increasing globalisation has been speeding up the rhythm of intercultural interactions. These interactions do not necessarily take place outside the home organisation. While cultural diversity is becoming characteristic of most working environments, there is often no or only very limited time to prepare employees for working with people from other cultures. However, the working world requires a fast adaptation to the diversity of the global and domestic workforce. Also, joint ventures, strategic alliances and team projects conducted between businesses or other types of organisations across the globe nowadays require a culturally competent workforce. Hence, the original assumption of the ICOPROMO project team was the following: if university graduates or young managers can demonstrate the ability to move comfortably between cultures and if they are able to work efficiently in multicultural teams, they possess qualities that make them attractive to the labour market. In addition, these skills will contribute substantially to their own job satisfaction.

The problem we could see from the beginning was that organisations were not aware of the need to develop the intercultural skills of employees who were not sent abroad. In general, participants in intercultural training courses are only recruited among those employees who have an immediate need for the training because they are about to begin an international assignment. Therefore, the trainees are either future expatriates (and their families) who are preparing for a longer stay abroad or people working for an international organisation who are getting ready for a certain assignment/project in a foreign country. Before starting an international assignment, trainees are mostly interested in hard facts about the host country, such as cost of living, safety, accommodation or schools available for their children. Additionally, they tend to be concerned about local etiquette. Trainees expect to receive clear advice on how they should behave in the target culture, what they should be careful about, what they should avoid, what is considered polite or impolite and what are efficient strategies for negotiations or for dealing with employees from a specific culture. Hence, frequently the

content of intercultural training is largely determined by the prospective host culture and is therefore often quite culture-specific.

When the ICOPROMO team started to tackle their project, the members were aware of the situation outlined above. However, their intention was not so much to improve existing training programmes for future expatriates or project managers, as ample material has already been published in this field. Instead, we felt that current developments in international organisations required a more sustainable solution for the problems occurring in multicultural teamwork. Literature also shows that cultural differences in multicultural teams are often downplayed from the outset and that the inability to deal with them can create major problems over time. Among the challenges most frequently cited are language problems, different communication styles, different concepts of hierarchy and power, different leadership styles, lack of understanding each other's values, norms and preferences, to name but a few. (Adler, 1997; Reber et al., 1993, 2000; DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Glaser, 2002; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Marquart & Horvath, 2001; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000).

In our search for a solution to existing problems in multicultural teamwork, we assumed that it would not be enough to develop a set of training activities that might be suitable for the enhancement of the intercultural competence of the team members. In fact, before focusing on the training itself, a theoretical model was needed to form the backbone of any kind of training approach developed for this purpose. Such a model could only be established on the basis of substantial desk and field research.

Therefore, models and theoretical concepts on cross-cultural competence and communication (Bennett, 1998; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Byram et al., 2001, Ting-Toomey, 1999) were discussed and a comprehensive field study was carried out within the parameters of the ICOPROMO project sponsored by the EU programme LEONARDO DA VINCI. This project was conceptualised, designed and coordinated by Manuela Guilherme, Centro de Estudos Sociais, Universidade de Coimbra, with the following participants: Evelyne Glaser and Iris Fischlmayr, Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, María del Carmen Méndez García and María Luisa Pérez Cañado, Universidad de Jaén, Anneli Kansanen, IME Helsinki, Günther Zöls, VoestAlpine Industriebau, and João Paulo Barbosa de Melo, Centro de Estudos e Formação Autárquica, Coimbra. As the two projects were carried out simultaneously, the ECML team, who were also members of the LEONARDO project, decided to base their work

on the same study and to use some of the data. This was done based on the agreement of the Leonardo ICOPROMO team members.

### **Aim of the Study**

In order for the ICOPROMO team to develop a model on intercultural competence for professional mobility and to design a set of sample activities that would be apt to enhance cultural competence, there was a strong need to find out, not only from existing literature but especially from experienced team members, what they deemed to be the most relevant success and failure factors in multicultural teams. It was decided that this should be done in a qualitative study conducted in all four countries involved in the project. Preference was given to a qualitative over a quantitative study, because the ICOPROMO team was not so much interested in the frequency with which specific problems occurred in multicultural teams. Instead, we wanted to do a thorough analysis of culture-related experiences as portrayed by people who had been working in teams across cultures over a prolonged period of time. The research questions underlying our study were defined as follows:

1. What are the most efficient/effective types of interactions in multicultural teams?
2. Which are the most frequent reasons for conflicts in multicultural teams?
3. Which intercultural competences are necessary to improve multicultural teamwork?
4. In which ways are power relations established in multicultural teams?

The qualitative study intended to serve several purposes. In line with the multiple functions of qualitative research (Ritchie, 2003: 27ff.), we first aimed to do a *contextual* analysis which would allow us to get a clear picture of the major characteristics and dimensions of multicultural teams. During this step we tried to identify how our interviewees experienced teamwork. Secondly, the purpose of our *evaluative* research was to examine the reasons for existing problems, successes or failures of teamwork across cultures. In the *evaluative* step of our research we made an attempt at appraising effective approaches to multicultural teamwork, and finally, during the *generative* phase of our research, we used the study as a basis for the design of a model for the development of intercultural competence and for a set of sample activities which we hope will foster such development.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

The ICOPROMO team conducted two rounds of semi-structured or theme-focused, in-depth interviews between February and July 2004 in Austria, Germany, Portugal and Spain. The

purpose of focusing on a pre-defined theme was to generate in-depth personal accounts on experiences with multicultural teams. We wanted to understand the complex processes and the dominant issues of cross-cultural teamwork before attempting to develop a theoretical model on intercultural competence. Hence, according to Rubin and Rubin (1995), the types of interviews that were held could be called 'topical interviews', as they were rather "narrowly focused on a particular event or process" and were "concerned with what happened and why" (p. 28). In our case we wanted to find out about the experiences the interviewees had in the multicultural teams, about communicative interaction, the role of language, team processes (power issues and conflicts) and suggestions for coping strategies.

The interview guidelines were established together during a team discussion. Interview partners were required to have at least one-year's experience of working in a multicultural team. Interviewers had to make sure that there was a relatively even distribution of interview partners from business, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and international relations (IR). Also, there was to be a certain mix concerning gender and age. The interview partners of the first round of interviews also had to have a degree in social sciences. Thus, while there was to be some homogeneity of the sample granted by the fact that all participants had to have experience in multicultural teams, special attention was paid to the fact that there was enough heterogeneity with regard to gender, age and professional background.

Interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes; they were recorded on audiotape or mini-disc with the explicit permission of the interviewees and were held (were possible) in the native language of the interviewee to ensure that connotations of words and expressions were properly understood. The topics focused on the following issues:

- Description of the team;
- Forms of communication and work coordination;
- Characteristics of efficient teams;
- Reasons for conflict and ways of dealing with it;
- Influence in multicultural teams and reasons for it;
- Suggestions for preparing team members for teamwork and for improving teamwork.

After bringing together the results from the first round of interviews, the team members decided that it would be valuable to see whether some findings could be confirmed across the four countries and whether some of the interview partners would give away more information

through probing questions on issues they had mentioned during the first round. The second round was to be shorter. Again, it was agreed that interview partners had to come from each of the three areas determined earlier, i.e. business, NGO or IR. According to the interview guidelines one question was derived from a statement made in the first interview, two questions were determined by the local interviewer, and three questions were asked by all interviewers. These three questions related to the following areas:

- Preferred qualities of team members in multicultural teams;
- The role of a democratic attitude in the work environment, with a particular emphasis on human rights, women's rights and ethnic rights;
- The position of native speakers in multicultural teams, their dominance (or lack of dominance) and possible coping strategies of non-native speakers;

In total, 77 interviews were conducted in the four countries involved (Austria 8/8; Germany 9/7; Portugal 17/6; Spain 16/6). This was a large enough sample providing rich details on the issues we wanted to analyse. The interviews were transcribed, the data was coded and categorised by the researchers in each country to obtain the prevalent key issues. These key issues were then presented in the team and were used for the construction of our model on intercultural competence. This process is in agreement with the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) which supports the process of abstracting theory from collected data without requiring the researchers to "embark on their studies without the general guidance provided by some sort of orienting theoretical perspective" (Locke, 2001: 34). Triangulation of research results occurred at a later stage of the project through a quantitative study on languages and intercultural training. (See Report on Quantitative Study in this publication.)

## **Research Results**

The results obtained from the qualitative study provided the major elements of the ICOPROMO Transformational Model on the Development of Intercultural Competence for Professional Mobility which has been explained in great detail in this publication. As the project team wanted to base its theoretical concepts primarily on a needs analysis carried out with experienced members of multicultural teams rather than relying exclusively on existing literature or theory, the categories formed after the interviewing process represent the core of the ICOPROMO Model. All the competences included in the model were thus derived from

the descriptions and statements of interview partners across the four countries where the interviews were held. The following analysis can only provide a small sample of the responses that have contributed to the design of our theoretical construct.

The research team clearly realises that the term "intercultural competence" is used in many different contexts and is given many different meanings. This need not necessarily be regarded as a drawback. Instead, it shows the complexity of this term and the need to filter out those elements for training that can be of greatest use in the global working environment. One interviewee makes an attempt to grasp the manifold skills and abilities frequently associated with this term. This interviewee points out that the first element is reflexivity and the awareness that no culture is intrinsically "better" than the other. Secondly, there is the idea of openness as the opposite of prejudice and stereotyping, and the willingness to learn. Thirdly, it comprises knowledge about customs, religions and traditions and the appropriate way of dealing with the local people. Finally and very importantly, there is the idea of real communication which involves not only speaking but also listening and understanding.

*Interkulturelle Kompetenz ist ein wunderhübsches Schlagwort, das wahrscheinlich jeder anders definiert, und wo extrem viele verschiedene Komponenten drinnen sind. Für mich sind die grundlegenden Arten des Zugangs einmal die, ich muss wissen, aus welcher Kultur ich komme, ohne zu wissen, dass das die bessere oder übergeordnete Kultur ist. Das ist einmal die erste Geschichte. Wir kommen oft mit Vorurteilen oder, besser, gewissen Verhaltensweisen rein, die halt nicht überall Usus sind. Und die zweite Kompetenz dazu ist die Bereitschaft, zu lernen und verstehen zu wollen. Ich muss mich informieren, wo ich hingeh, in welches Umfeld. Ich muss mich informieren, was dort Landes-, Kulturelle- oder religiöse Sitte ist, um zu sagen, wie gehen ich dort mit dem Lokalpersonal um, wie gehe ich mit den Benefizienten um, mit den Hilfsbedürftigen, für die ich eigentlich arbeite. Und dann natürlich auch schauen, welches Team da ist, mit welchen kulturellen Aspekten, wie ich das einfach matche. Die dritte und nicht unwesentliche Geschichte ist die, dass die Leute kommunizieren können müssen. Nicht nur sprachlich, sondern auch inhaltlich. Das ist aber, zum Kommunizieren gehört nicht nur reden, sondern auch zuhören, und ein gewisses Potential an Bereitschaft, das Gehörte auch aufzunehmen, und auch anzunehmen. [Intercultural competence is a beautiful catchword, which is probably defined differently by everybody, and which contains numerous components. For me the basic approaches are that I must know from which culture I come, without claiming that this is the better or dominant culture. That's the first part of the story. We often come into a team with prejudices or, better, with certain behaviours which are not adequate everywhere. And the second competence is being prepared to learn and to be willing to understand. I must inform myself about the environment I am about to enter. I must inform myself about the typical cultural and religious customs to be able to say how I am supposed to treat the local staff and the beneficiaries, those who need help, those for whom I work. And then I have to look which team there is with which cultural aspects, how I can match this. The third and not least important story is that people need to be able to communicate. Not only with regard to language but also with regard to content. Communicating does not only mean speaking, it also means listening and a certain potential for the willingness to take in what you have heard and to accept it.] (Austria, WI 2, NGO)*

Another interviewee points out the importance of the concept of "unlearning", i.e. of consciously leaving behind our own cultural concepts. This will enable us to become open to different perspectives and to learn new things.

*... den Leuten vor Augen zu führen, dass nicht alles, was wir hier selbstverständlich in unserer eigenen Kultur tun, in der anderen Kultur a) die gleiche Bedeutung hat und b) positiv aufgenommen wird, sich einfach einmal sozusagen aus dieser fixen kulturellen Verankerung herauszulassen und zu sagen: es gibt, oder man kann Dinge auch anders sehen. [...to show people that not everything we take for granted in our own culture a) has the same meaning in the other culture or b) will be looked upon positively; so to speak, to simply set sail from one's cultural mooring and to admit that one can look upon things differently.] (Austria, RO 2, Business)*

The following sections are grouped according to the competences included in our model.

## **Awareness of the Self and the Other**

Awareness of Self and Other, particularly when incorporated into an intercultural situation, involves a rich communicative and interactive exchange. Above and beyond all other things it results in a reflection on one's own culture and social construct. At the same time, it forces the individual to deal with the issues of stereotyping and generalisations.

*Wenn man im Ausland ist, dann lernt man auch sehr viel über seine eigene Kultur kennen. Man merkt auch, was man alles nicht kennt von seinem eigenen Land. Man fängt an, sich darüber Gedanken zu machen, was eigentlich typisch deutsch ist, wie sich ein typischer Deutscher verhält, was ein Deutscher gut findet, wie er seine Freizeit verbringt etc. Mich haben sie in Japan auch sehr über die deutsche klassische Musik und Dichtung ausgefragt: Goethe, Thomas Mann etc. Da musste ich auch erst mal nachlesen. Das kann schon ganz schön peinlich werden. (Germany, 9, NGO) [When you are abroad you also learn a lot about your own culture. You also realise, what you don't know about your own country. You start thinking about what is typically German, how a typical German behaves, what a German finds good, how he spends his free time etc. I was asked a lot in Japan about classical music and literature: Goethe and Thomas Mann etc. I had to read up on that first. This can be quite embarrassing.]*

The very experience of working in multicultural groups adds, according to our interviewees, a special dynamics to the mere professional experience of a workgroup either at home or abroad:

*sempre me dá a impressão o facto de uma equipa ser multicultural, haaa, obriga quase a ter uma muito abertura que nos traz sensibilidade para estas questões de dinâmicas de grupo, precisamente por termos que perceber o que é que é os ritmos de trabalho de uma outra pessoa, perceber as origens (...)* ["I always get the impression that the fact that a team is multicultural, umm, it almost forces us to be more open, which makes us more aware of these issues of group dynamics, precisely because we have to understand what another person's work rhythms are, to understand their background (...)] (Portugal, A1)

It also includes recognising differences and similarities, acknowledging that we all have some needs and interests in common and others that make us different. Exploring as well as sharing them can not only expand our cultural knowledge but also transform our perceptions of the world. Awareness of the same and the different also helps to avoid a common problem described by Bennett (1986, 1993) in his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. Bennett terms it "minimization of cultural differences", which may result in trivialisation or

romanticisation of differences between cultures. This is particularly dangerous when dealing with cultures which are geographically close:

*... das Wichtigste ist einfach dieses Bewusstsein der Andersartigkeit. Nicht nur Deutsche und Japaner sind so weit auseinander oder Deutsche und Araber. Auch zwischen Deutschen und Franzosen ist auch schon mal ein Unterschied, obwohl wir nah beieinander leben; oder Deutsche und Holländer. Das kann vielleicht viel schlimmer - also viel schwieriger - sein, als mit Chinesen zu arbeiten oder Japanern. Wenn man da von vornherein schon mal aufmerksamer ist oder sich vorstellen kann, dass da Unterschiede sind. Bei den anderen geht man eigentlich davon aus. Wir sind ja alle hier in Europa und irgendwie sind wir ja alle gleich. Und da ist man einfach nicht so vorsichtig, glaube ich. Und da kann viel mehr schief laufen. [the most important thing is simply the awareness of difference. Not only Germans and Japanese are very much apart, or Germans and Arabs. There is also a difference between the Germans and the French, even though we live close to each other, or between the Dutch and the French. It can even be more difficult – much more difficult – than working with Chinese or Japanese, because there you are much more attentive from the beginning, or you can imagine that there will be differences. With the others, we more or less assume that we are all the same here in Europe. So, you are less careful I think. So, much more can go wrong.] (Germany 15, NGO)*

One of our interviewees focused on the potential of shared entertainment and enthusiasm to draw people together and give them the impression that the fact that they are temporarily united in the same interest can erase, if only for a moment, any cultural differences:

*Recuerdo que una tarde se fueron a ver un partido del Real Madrid. Lo llevaban organizando dos o tres semanas y estaban todos super emocionados: Eso unió mucho porque era un tema común que casi no hay diferencias interculturales porque ahora en casi todo el mundo occidental hay mucha gente que le gusta el fútbol, y el fútbol unía. Era un terreno sin diferencias, ni escondidas ni a la vista. [I remember that one evening they went to see a match of Real Madrid. They had been planning this for two or three weeks and were all extremely excited. This united them a lot because it was a common topic which holds virtually no cultural differences, because nowadays, in most parts of the western world, there are many people who like football, and football unites. It was a field without any differences, neither hidden nor visible ones.] (Spain, 1.6)*

However, there are always some previous representations and even prejudices that may damage ongoing communication and interaction in multicultural workgroups although the rhetoric used by their members may acknowledge the equal value and the common features of individual members rooted in different ethnic communities. Representations of ethnic communities are not only overgeneralised to apply to each member of the group, but they often include some kind of absolute judgement with either a positive or negative weight. This is also stated by one interviewee:

*Então é um bocado nesta linha... é de... é preocupar-se menos, com o formal, cognitivo e trabalhar mais pá com... haaaa... com as representações, que as pessoas têm, que as pessoas dizem, “sim senhor, os ciganos pá, são iguais à malta etc. mas depois mesmo assim pá, cautela”, isto não se muda nem com estatísticas, nem dizendo as pessoas pá que devem, se calhar uma maneira diferente. [So it's a little along these lines... it's... it's about worrying less about the formal, cognitive and working more with... ummm... with the representations that people have, that people say, “yes, gypsies are just like the rest of us, etc. but then, even so, be careful”, this can't be changed even with statistics, or by telling people that they should, perhaps in a different way.] (Portugal, B1)*



## Communicating across cultures

The term 'communication' is often primarily associated with language skills. In multicultural teams; it seems to be a major concern that all members are fluent in the team language, as this will increase the efficiency of the team. Hence, working on one's language proficiency in preparation for multicultural teamwork is considered by more than one team member to be the best prerequisite for successful team communication:

*ich glaube die beste Vorbereitung ist wenn man wirklich darauf schaut, dass die team members ein exzellentes command der gemeinsamen lingua franca haben. Also das ist einmal Nummer eins. Weil ohne das wird es natürlich ganz schwer. Und das ist natürlich auch eine Frage der Vorbereitung. [I think the best preparation is to make sure that the team members have an excellent command of the common lingua franca. This is the very first thing. Because without this it becomes very difficult. And of course this is a question of preparation.] (Austria, SP 1)*

However, a number of interviewees also recognise the value of learning the language of other team members, even though the proficiency they can reach may remain quite low. They see this more as a sign of recognition of and appreciation for the other culture, a possibility to foster relationship building during the first contact with the representatives from the host culture:

*Das Allerwichtigste ist einfach, diesen ersten Kontakt herzustellen. Und da ist die sprachliche Barriere natürlich immer ein Stolperstein. Und das ist das Schöne daran, dass sie sagen: Ja, ich habe zumindest sagen können „Wie geht es Ihnen“ und der freut sich. (...) Und da sieht man dann, egal welches Land, vor allem aber diese von unserer Sicht aus kleinen Länder und sprachlich auch kleinen Länder, wie hoch sie es schätzen, wenn ihnen jemand entgegenkommt, und der sowieso unter Anführungszeichen „Weltsprachen“ wie Deutsch oder Englisch spricht, und der sich die Mühe genommen hat und die Zeit genommen hat, für diese Sprache auch etwas zu tun und sich auch in dieser Sprache äußern zu können. Also das ist etwas, was man mit Geld überhaupt nicht bezahlen kann. [The most important thing is to create this initial contact, and there, the language barrier is of course always an obstacle. And the nice thing is that you can say: Yes, at least I was able to say "How are you?", and he is happy. (...) And there you can see that no matter which country, but above all from the perspective of small countries, also small with regard to language, how much it is appreciated when someone approaches them (in their language), especially someone who is fluent in "world languages" such as German or English and who has made the effort to utter something in the other language. Well, this is something that you cannot pay for in money.] (Austria, KA 1)*

Communicating across cultures implies facing not only different linguistic codes but also different communication styles. Variables ruling communication standards in one language may include, among others, differences according to region, social class, generation, personality, etc. However, these differences multiply and intertwine with each other when different linguistic and cultural codes communicate both verbally and non-verbally. One of our interviewees reports one of his/her experience in a very illustrative manner:

*Y Cheikh opina que yo soy muy agresiva (aunque no quiero otra vez usar esa palabra): Yo ya voy enseguida, miro a la gente '¿Cómo vas?', '¿Cómo estas?', '¿Has ido a la entrevista?'. Entonces Cheikh me dice 'es que eres muy descarada, ¿cómo llegas a una persona y la miras así a los ojos?'. Cheikh dice que te tienen que dar permiso, entonces yo noto que Cheikh, a los participantes, entra con un poco más de timidez, en principio no les mira nunca cara a cara, es su protocolo. Mi protocolo es distinto: 'Venga Cheikh, pregúntale esto' y él dice 'Oye, déjame que yo vaya un poco a mi ritmo (1.2)*

*Vamos, había muchas veces en las que había que dibujar las cosas porque había malinterpretaciones.* [And Cheikh thinks that I am very aggressive (although I don't want to use this word again): I walk straight up to the people and look at them 'How are you?' 'How are you doing?' 'Did you go to the interview?'. Then Cheikh said 'The thing is that you have no inhibitions.' 'How can you walk up to a person and look him/her into the eyes like that?' Cheikh said that they had to give you permission first. Then I noticed that Cheikh approaches the participants with a little more shyness, in principle he never looks them into the face. It's his ritual. My ritual is different: 'Come on Cheikh, ask him this' and he says 'Look. Let me do it a little in my way.' (1.2) There were many times when I had to make drawings of things because there were misinterpretations.] (Spain, 1.6)

Communicating across cultures in a professional environment implies having to focus on and accomplishing one task. Therefore, our interviewees expressed the need for particular care by multicultural workgroup members in relation to their communication styles. Such a context requires, according to them, particular attention to linguistic accuracy, speech clarity and providing enough opportunities for clarification:

*...e com outras equipas de outro tipo de... vá lá... multiculturais, há mais essa preocupação de expressão correcta, de clareza, de... e de espaço.”* [“and with other teams of another kind of... let's say...multicultural, there is a greater concern with expressing ourselves correctly, with clarity... and with space.”] (Portugal, A1)

Yet, communication does not only mean speaking, but it also means listening. Several interviewees have recognised this quite clearly and therefore attach special importance to this skill:

*Wir brauchen Leute, die kommunizieren können (...), also die wirklich kommunizieren und nicht nur sprechen. Wir brauchen Leute, die einigermaßen in der Lage sind, auch zuzuhören, das heißt einem Teamkollegen auch Meinungsfreiheit zugestehen.* [We need people who can communicate (...) I mean people who really communicate and do not only speak. We need people who are also somewhat able to listen; this means granting another team member the freedom of opinion.] (Austria, WI 2)

## **Acquiring Cultural Knowledge**

The knowledge acquired about the world in general and the specific cultures with which we are interacting in particular not only enriches the contents of communication and interaction but also facilitates more appropriate strategies. The effectiveness of intercultural communication and interaction can thereby also be improved. Openness to other cultural behaviours also implies curiosity about their motives and foundations:

*Acho que o que há nas pessoas também é uma apetência e tornar positiva a ideia de conhecer outra cultura que não seja um conhecimento superficial, ou...facilitista, porque há muitas vezes isso também.* [I think that what there is also in people is a desire and to realise the idea of getting to know another culture, and not just in a superficial or... simplifying way, because that happens a lot as well.] (Portugal, N1)

According to another interviewee, displaying some interest in the details of other cultural behaviours and the cultural norms which support them not only shows respect for our interlocutors but also provides us with knowledge that enables us to genuinely respect them:

*Eso parte del respeto a otras culturas pero también de que la gente, cuando trabaja en un grupo multicultural, tiene que estar alerta y tiene que conocer las otras culturas para poderlas respetar. [This derives from the respect for other cultures but also from the fact that people, when they work in a multicultural team, need to be aware of and need to get to know other cultures to be able to respect them.] (Spain, 1.11)*

This opinion is shared by a German team member who states:

*Ich habe die Erfahrung gemacht, dass es ganz zentral ist, möglichst viel über die jeweiligen Kulturen in Erfahrung zu bringen bzw. sich viel Wissen anzueignen, bevor man sich auf ein Team einlässt. [I have made the experience that it is very central to find out as much as possible about the other cultures, to acquire as much knowledge as possible before launching oneself into a team.] (Germany 7, NGO)*

Several interviewees also agree that asking someone from the host culture is a totally legitimate way of obtaining information or to get help with a certain task. The right way of asking is also considered a skill:

*Es muss eine Fähigkeit geben, wo der, der hier sitzt zu dem sagen kann: Sag mir, was ich machen muss, ich kann das nicht machen. Was mach ich hier falsch, und wie soll ich das machen? Und dass dann der von der anderen Seite sagt: Ich sage dir, wie du das machen sollst. [There must be a skill where the person who is sitting here can ask the other one: Tell me how I am supposed to do this, I can't do it. What am I doing wrong here, and how shall I do it? And then the other one will say: I will tell you how to do it.] (Austria, RA 1)*

*Man kann Leute immer und überall fragen: Wie verhalte ich mich richtig? Ich verstehe das jetzt nicht, wie du reagierst, ich verstehe jetzt nicht was du sagst, ich verstehe den Hintergrund nicht, weiß somit auch nicht wie ich damit umgehen soll. Kann sein, dass ich mich daneben benehme, kann sein, dass ich jetzt nicht die richtige Situation bringe, ich verstehe es einfach nicht. Die meisten Leute werden dann auch willens sein, das auch aufzuklären. [You can always ask people everywhere: How do I behave right? I don't understand why you are reacting this way now; I don't understand what you are saying, I don't understand the background and therefore don't know how to deal with this: It may well be that I am behaving in the wrong way. It may well be that I don't get the situation, I just don't understand. Most people will then be willing to explain.] (Austria, WI 2)*

## **Sense-making**

Making sense of what we hear and see without mastering or even sharing the verbal and non-verbal codes of those with whom we communicate and interact is a challenge that we must learn to meet gradually with increasing effectiveness while working in multicultural teams. This implies not only mastering the linguistic code used, which often does not happen, but also the cultural codes. When none of this happens, this competence can turn into a survival tool for the communication/interaction or even into the basis of a successful and enriching intercultural experience. One of our interviewees points out some strategies which may help in a meeting:

*Ou seja, tentar perceber quando eu não era entendida, para corrigir ou recolocar aquilo, porque num painel internacional, onde existem mais de duas ou três culturas trabalhando, é necessário que isso aconteça. Então é uma percepção muito grande de todo o contexto, para verificar as necessidades de interrupção e de recolocação da comunicação. [In other words, to try and work out when I wasn't understood, to correct or restore that, because in an international panel, where there are more than two or three cultures working together, this is necessary. So it is a very deep perception of the whole context, to see the need for interrupting or restoring communication.] (Portugal, D2)*

In addition, it is also very important to attempt to identify, perceive and understand prevalent values, beliefs and norms in a situation. Trying to figure out why peers behave in a certain way in a given situation is not easy and requires training, as it is acknowledged by several participants in our study:

*Nos pidieron propuestas; yo di la idea de que las mesas, al principio, estaban puestas como por cuadros por países. Cada cuadrado era una zona por países. De hecho, había gente como creo que los ingleses que tenían puesta su bandera nacional y todo, era un poco (...) Hicimos la propuesta. Como sabíamos que el sentimiento nacional no hay quien se lo quite a mucha gente y que iban a querer seguir manteniendo su zona y sus símbolos, propusimos que hubiese gente que pudiera ir rotando dentro de los otros países, que dos personas de cada país tuvieran que ir rotando cada dos o tres semanas a las otras zonas y trabajar en un puesto para poder hablar, interrelacionarse (...): Pero la gente al final volvía a su sitio, volvía a colocar las cosas en su sitio y (...) era difícil. [They were asking us for suggestions; I gave them the idea that in the beginning the tables would be placed like in squares for the countries. Each square was a zone for a country. Indeed, there were people, like for instance the English, who put up their national flag, and everything was a bit (...). We made the suggestion. As we knew that many people couldn't get rid of their national feelings and that they would maintain their zone and their symbols, we suggested that there would be people who would rotate between countries, that two people from each country would have to rotate every two or three weeks to work in a post in the other zones to be able to speak and to develop relationships (...) But finally the people went back to their place, they brought the things back to their place and (...) it was difficult.] (Spain, 1.6)*

*... die Fähigkeit zu haben, die Neugier, die Fähigkeit zu haben, zu versuchen zu verstehen, warum das einen Sinn macht für den anderen. Weil häufig diskutiert man ja: das ist richtig, das ist falsch, das ist gut, das ist schlecht. Aber eine Fähigkeit entwickeln zu sagen: ich nehme an, dass das eine Logik hat, was der andere denkt. Und ich will draufkommen, was die Logik ist. [... to have the ability, the curiosity, the ability to try to understand why this makes sense to the other person. Because frequently we discuss: this is right, this is wrong, this is good, this is bad. But to develop the ability to say: I assume that there is some logic behind what the other person thinks. And I want to find out what this logic is.] (Austria, RA1)*

What is interesting about the second statement is that there is also a reference to "curiosity", a disposition that we found to be of great importance for the development of intercultural competence.

## **Perspective taking**

Being interculturally competent requires the capacity to look at reality from different angles. It presupposes the capacity to see the events from somebody else's position. Perspective taking is based on attitudes such as empathy, flexibility, decentring, open-mindedness and coping with ambiguity, as mentioned previously. Several participants in this study argue for this and attempt to find some justification for the importance of this capacity:

*Es la falta de entendimiento y la falta de empatía. Yo pienso que uno tiene que ponerse siempre en el lugar del otro. Y esas personas que están aquí, yo tengo compañeros inmigrantes y compañeros refugiados, cuando han venido aquí, es por algo, porque allí les ocurrió algo. Intenta ponerte en el lugar del otro para saber por qué está aquí porque quizá te toque a ti mañana. Porque, si no comprendes los motivos del otro, siempre lo vas a ver como un extraño. Entonces, lo que intentamos facilitar aquí es un conocimiento personal que nos haga limar todas las asperezas posibles que puedan estar debido a eso, digamos... las diferencias entre aptitudes, actitudes, el lenguaje...etc. [It's a lack of understanding and a lack of empathy. I think that one always has to put oneself into someone else's shoes. And the people who are here, I've got colleagues who are immigrants and colleagues who*

are refugees, when they came here, they had a reason, because something happened to them there. Try to put yourself in the other's position to find out why they are here, because perhaps it will be your turn tomorrow. Because, if you don't understand the motives of the other, you will always see him as a foreigner. Thus, what we intend to facilitate here is personal knowledge that will smooth out all the possible unevenness that might exist due to this, say ... the differences between aptitudes, attitudes, the language and so on.] (Spain, 1.7)

*Also sozusagen dieser Austausch von Sichtweisen ist also ganz, ganz wichtig, und der sollte tunlichst auch vom operativen Geschäft abgehoben sein. Entweder man macht es vorher, oder man reserviert wirklich Tage oder von mir aus auch Wochenenden, wo man das gemeinsam tut. Wo es einfach über die normale Arbeit hinaus einfach den Austausch gibt. Wo man sagt: wie siehst du das? Überhaupt: wie führst du dein Leben? Weil wenn ich mir da anschau wie z. B. einige unserer Kollegen in Rumänien unterwegs sind, und unter welchen Voraussetzungen die arbeiten, dann habe ich ein wesentlich größeres Verständnis, warum gewisse Dinge so funktionieren wie sie funktionieren. [So to speak, this exchange of perspectives is very, very important, and it should be kept apart from operative business. Either you do it beforehand, or you reserve some days or even weekends, where you do this together. Where there is an exchange that goes beyond the normal work. Where you say: how do you see this? In general: how do you lead your life? Because, when I see under which conditions our colleagues work in Romania, I have a much better understanding of why certain things function as they do.] (Austria, WU 1)*

Another interviewee points out the importance of revising one's position and methodology, over and over again. S/he continues by stating that this is not a matter of trying to remedy one's past failures but, on the contrary, an original predisposition, that is, of trying to make somebody aware, right from the beginning, of the need to continuously scrutinise different viewpoints:

*E muitas vezes o problema não está aí, o problema está... é mais a montante. É como é que a gente entra nessas coisas, não é se é mais isto ou mais... menos aquilo, é que se calhar é a própria estratégia e metodologia de intervenção que estão erradas e que a gente tem que rever.” [“And often the problem isn't that, the problem is...it lies further back. It's how we get into these things, it's that it's more this or more... less that, because perhaps it's the strategy itself and the intervention methodology that are wrong and that we need to revise.] (Portugal, B1)*

## **Relationship Building**

Relationship building in multicultural teams entails, according to our interviewees, particular challenges but it also offers special rewards. One of the participants in our study recognises that successful multicultural teams can develop a specific kind of dynamics geared towards relationship building when group members are aware that they do not know each other and that their collaboration can be improved if they establish relationships that go beyond the strict professional exchanges:

*...isso tem a ver com uma maneira de abordar as pessoas e perceber a riqueza que uma equipa multicultural traz, e uma equipa multicultural traz riqueza para uma empresa, para uma ong, para as pessoas que tenham sua própria empresa e pequeno negócio, seja o que for..” [that has to do with a way of approaching people and understanding how a multicultural team can be enriching, and a multicultural team enriches a company, an NGO, the people who have their own company or small business, whatever it is...] (Portugal, I2: p. 5)*

Establishing good relationships in a team helps to overcome conflict and to solve problems. In order to build good personal relationships in a multicultural team, one must take into account the cultural background of one's colleagues as well as try to find out how the interplay between it and their personality works. This requires the use of diplomacy, according to one of our interviewees, although there is no comment here about the different meanings diplomatic behaviour may have across cultures:

*Intentando cada uno saber sus puntos débiles, no puntos débiles sino... Exactamente, tu no a todo el mundo les puedes tratar de la misma forma. Cada uno tiene su propia personalidad, entonces intentas un poco pues con diplomacia [...]Entonces yo entiendo que al final es diplomacia, mano izquierda, saber un poco... o conocer la personalidad de cada uno y, bueno, saber qué gente te va a responder y qué gente no te va a responder. [When we try to get to know their weaknesses, maybe not weaknesses but... Exactly, you cannot treat them in the same way all over the world. Everyone has their own personality, therefore you are trying to do it with a little bit of diplomacy.(...) Then, I understand that in the end it is diplomacy, determination, knowing a little bit ... or knowing the personality of all of them, and, well, knowing that some people will respond and that some people will not respond.] (Spain, 1.1)*

*Wenn man einen Konflikt mit einem Serben oder Albaner oder Kroaten hat, dann reicht es oft aus, dass man sozusagen eine persönliche Art von Verbrüderung herstellt. Und ohne, dass der Konflikt tatsächlich in der Sache gelöst ist, gibt es dann eigentlich kein Problem mehr. Weil man sozusagen die persönliche Ebene so gut bereitet hat, dass dann der bereit ist, nachzugeben. Und sagt: Ach, das machen wir schon. Das ist mit Russen sehr ähnlich. [When you have a conflict with a Serb or a Croat or an Albanian, it is often enough to establish some kind of comradeship. And without really solving the conflict, there won't be a problem anymore. Because the personal relationship is so good, the other one is ready to give in. And he says: Ok, we'll do that. With Russians it is very similar.] (Austria, SP1)*

A major result of relationship building is the development of trust, and this, in turn, is of utmost importance in teamwork. Without trust there is no commitment, no sharing of information, no joint effort to reach the common goal:

*es geht halt auch um eine persönliche Beziehung, um eine persönliche Bindung, um Vertrauen, damit man jemand anderen auch auf einer Business-Ebene trauen kann. [It's also a question of personal relations, of personal ties, of trust, so that you can trust someone also on the business level.] (Austria, SP 2)*

## **Social Responsibility**

The idea of social responsibility can end up being described as something abstract and restricted to the domain of political correctness rhetoric, if it is not illustrated with concrete examples in specific situations. The participants in our study provided us with examples from their everyday lives which help clarify the implications of one's commitment to being socially responsible in a multicultural context. One interviewee described what, in his/her own view and according to his/her own possibilities, could be implied by the sense of social responsibility of the local member of a multicultural workgroup:

*Yo, como era español, en el fondo sentía que una de mis obligaciones era intentar enseñarles como funcionan las cosas en España; entonces yo a veces me los llevaba a sitios o les explicaba cosas... y*

*eso también ayudaba a la comunicación. Yo era una de las personas que más hablaba con la gente, pero también ayudaba que yo me sentía en casa. [As I was Spanish I felt basically that one of my duties was to try to teach them how things worked in Spain; therefore I often took them to places or explained things to them ... and this also fostered communication. I was one of the people who talked most to them, but it also helped me that I was at home.] (Spain, 1.6)*

Another interviewee expressed his/her understanding of the role that native speakers or those who master the language used in the workgroup should play towards those who do not display the same level of proficiency. This may also be considered an example of the social responsibility one should be committed to in a multilingual/multicultural professional situation where a definite task must be accomplished within a certain period of time, according to established standards and implying the final, implicit or explicit, assessment of the members of the workgroup:

*Eu acho que sim, porque se a pessoa sentir um espírito de confiança e coeso dentro da equipa, mesmo que tenha dificuldades vai-se expressar na mesma – se não sentir isso, se sentir dissabores dentro da equipa, se sentir dificuldades, se sentir realmente que as pessoas cada vez que a pessoa se tenta expressar as outras dizem “ah, mas nós não estamos a perceber, não interessa”, a pessoa retrai-se e não fala outra vez, não é? Portanto, isso passa muito pelo espírito da equipa, e isso é talvez a maneira de fomentar o trabalho com o facto de muitas pessoas saberem melhor a língua ou não é realmente criar um clima de maneira que as pessoas consigam todas expressar-se livremente independente do nível. [I think so, because if a person feels trust and cohesion within the team, even if s/he has difficulties, s/he will still express her/himself – if s/he don't feel that, if s/he senses displeasure within the team, if s/he senses difficulties, if s/he really feels that others, that every time s/he tries to express her/himself, others say “oh, but we can't understand, it doesn't matter”, s/he will retract and not speak up anymore, isn't it? So that has a lot to do with the team spirit and that may be a way to promote work given the fact that a lot of people know the language better, or isn't it really about creating an atmosphere so that everyone can express themselves freely, regardless of the level.] (Portugal, I2)*

## **Interlanguage / Interculture**

When multicultural teams work together over a longer period of time, remarkable things happen with regard to their use of language. Teams that start out by working with interpreters tend to arrive at more direct ways of communication in the course of time. On the one hand they become more fluent in the team language and use it with greater ease, on the other hand team members start to develop a kind of team language that does not necessarily conform to rules of grammar or pronunciation. Even the vocabulary used may not correspond to standard words in the respective language. What develops in the team is a kind of 'Third Space' concerning the language used by the team. As a Spanish interviewee puts it, the price team members are paying for the sake of communication is the strange phenomenon of adapting to the team language by 'losing their own language' and 'speaking worse English than before'. Nevertheless, communication through this 'third language' becomes more direct and team members can approach more sensitive issues in their meetings.

*Hay fenómenos de adaptación que son interesantes identificar como que cuando la gente empieza a llegar a las primeras reuniones pues empiezan a usar los intérpretes (porque para eso están) y se*

*quieren comunicar en su idioma (...): Luego ves cómo empiezan a intentar prescindir de los intérpretes para intentar hablar en una lengua vehicular común y tener una comunicación mas directa, y el precio a pagar es que tienes que perder tu propio idioma y que tu controlas peor el Inglés, pero es interesante ver cómo la gente tiene necesidad de comunicarse mas directamente a medida que aumenta las frecuencias de las reuniones, la sensibilidad de los temas (...).* [There are interesting adaptation phenomena that can be identified, for example when people start to come to the first meetings, they begin by using interpreters (because this is what they are here for), and they want to speak in their own language (...) Later on you can see how they start trying to come to terms without interpreters by using a common language to establish a more direct communication, and the price they are paying that they have to lose their own language and that their English gets worse, but it's interesting to see how they feel the need to communicate more directly, and with the increasing frequency of the meetings the topics get more sensitive.] (Spain, 1.10)

## **Learning / Unlearning**

Working in multicultural teams becomes a never-ending learning and unlearning process which encourages all members to constantly reconfigure their perspectives. Things they have been taking for granted about their own cultures are regarded from a greater distance and become less obvious. In turn, habits or customs that seemed aloof or strange and at times even gave rise to prejudice are met with more respect and greater understanding. This constant shift of points of view is a challenge but also a tremendous personal enrichment. As a Spanish team member describes it, his regular contacts with Arab colleagues in his/her office have taught him/her to pay greater respect to other cultures:

*A lo mejor yo tengo compañeros árabes a lo mejor en la oficina -no es mi caso ¿eh?, pero conozco a mucha gente que ha tenido compañeros Árabes en la oficina- y tú puedes estar en contra del velo o de muchas cosas, pero tú tienes que tener cuidado porque es su cultura, su respeto y no puedes decirlo directamente. O ellos tienen su Ramadán y a tí te puede parecer una tontería, pero es su religión y su compromiso, como a ellos les parecerá una estupidez que nosotros hagamos la Cuaresma o la Semana Santa. O sea, que el trabajar con grupos multiculturales te enseña mucho a respetar las diferentes culturas, a convivir con ello y a tener un respeto.* [Maybe I have Arab colleagues, maybe in the office – it's not the case for me, ummm, but I know many people who had Arab colleagues in the office – and you can be against the headscarf or against many other things, but you have to be careful because it's their culture, their respect, and you can't say it directly. Or they have their Ramadan, and you may find it stupid, but it's their religion and their duty, as it may seem stupid to them that we observe Lent or the Holy Week. In other words, working in multicultural teams teaches you a lot to respect different cultures, to live together with them and to respect them.] (Spain, 1.11)

Thus, most members of multicultural teams come to recognise the personal enrichment through the encounter with other points of view, other ways of thinking, other ways of approaching and solving problems that accompanies this learning process.

## **Conclusion**

The results from our qualitative study have turned out to be an immensely rich source of information and have greatly enhanced our understanding of the needs and requirements of a multicultural workforce. What we have found out has not really surprised us greatly.



However, the value of this study lies in the fact that it has revealed great similarities between the ideas of multicultural team members across cultures.

Becoming interculturally competent requires the ability to combine numerous qualities. In some respects it is such a great challenge that some of our interviewees feel that there is not much individuals can do to develop it, unless they have the right disposition and the necessary self-efficacy. Others are convinced that due to its complexity it is a lifelong process, during which people can improve their abilities and change their behaviours and attitudes but may never reach their aims completely:

*Ich glaube, interkulturell kompetent zu sein, ist ein lebenslanger Prozess. Wer das bewusst ernst nimmt, hat sein Leben lang zu arbeiten, und zwar auf einer Ebene, die einem selbst nicht immer so bewusst ist. Wirtschaft, Technik, Sprachen, das sind Handwerkszeuge. Interkulturelle Kompetenz ist eine Persönlichkeits- und Charaktereigenschaft, die kognitiv eine Schicht darunter liegt. Die umso listiger – oder mit der umso listiger zu arbeiten ist, weil es eine permanente Herausforderung ist, es einem nicht immer bewusst ist, und weil man in letzter Konsequenz – multiple Persönlichkeit ist vielleicht der falsche Ausdruck - aber man muss sehr vielschichtig sein. Ich glaube aber, wenn Sie Charaktereigenschaften hören wollen würden, würde ich auf Grundcharaktereigenschaften zurückgehen: aufmerksam sein – im positiven Sinne, zuhören können – was bis zu einem gewissen Grad mit Offenheit, großer Offenheit verbunden ist – andere Sichtweisen akzeptieren zu können, aus anderen Sichtweisen lernen zu können, und sich in letzter Konsequenz auch nicht zu wichtig zu nehmen, weil es sozusagen eine Vielzahl von kulturellen Daseinsmöglichkeiten gibt. [I think being interculturally competent is a lifelong process. Those who are consciously serious about it have to work on it for a lifetime, namely on a level you are not always aware of. Business, technology, languages, all these are tools. Intercultural competence is a personal quality, a character trait, which cognitively lies one level below this. It is even trickier because it represents a permanent challenge you are not always aware of, and because finally – multiple personalities is maybe the wrong term – but you have to be a multi-layered person. But if you want to hear about character traits, I think I will have to resort to basic qualities: being attentive – in a positive sense, being able to listen – which has to do with openness to some extent – with great openness – accepting other views, being able to learn from these other views, and finally, not taking yourself too seriously, because there are myriads of cultural forms of being.] (Austria, RO 2)*

This vision of intercultural competence clearly coincides with the one reflected in the ICOPROMO model which also implies continuity and constant change, or, as one interviewee puts it:

*... ich halte interkulturelle Kompetenz zwar ... für lernbar, aber das ist schwer. Und ein langwieriger Prozess, weil da geht es um, ... durchaus um 'change'. [I think that intercultural competence can be learned, but it is difficult. And it is a long process, because we are dealing basically with change.] (Austria, SP 1)*

This process of change is what our team is trying to focus on with the sample set of activities we have developed for the enhancement of intercultural competence. Many basic ideas for these activities have been gleaned from comments in our study. The activities have been tested with multicultural groups. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the limitations of our project in the sense that only a long-term study could show to what extent intercultural competence can be developed over time.

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