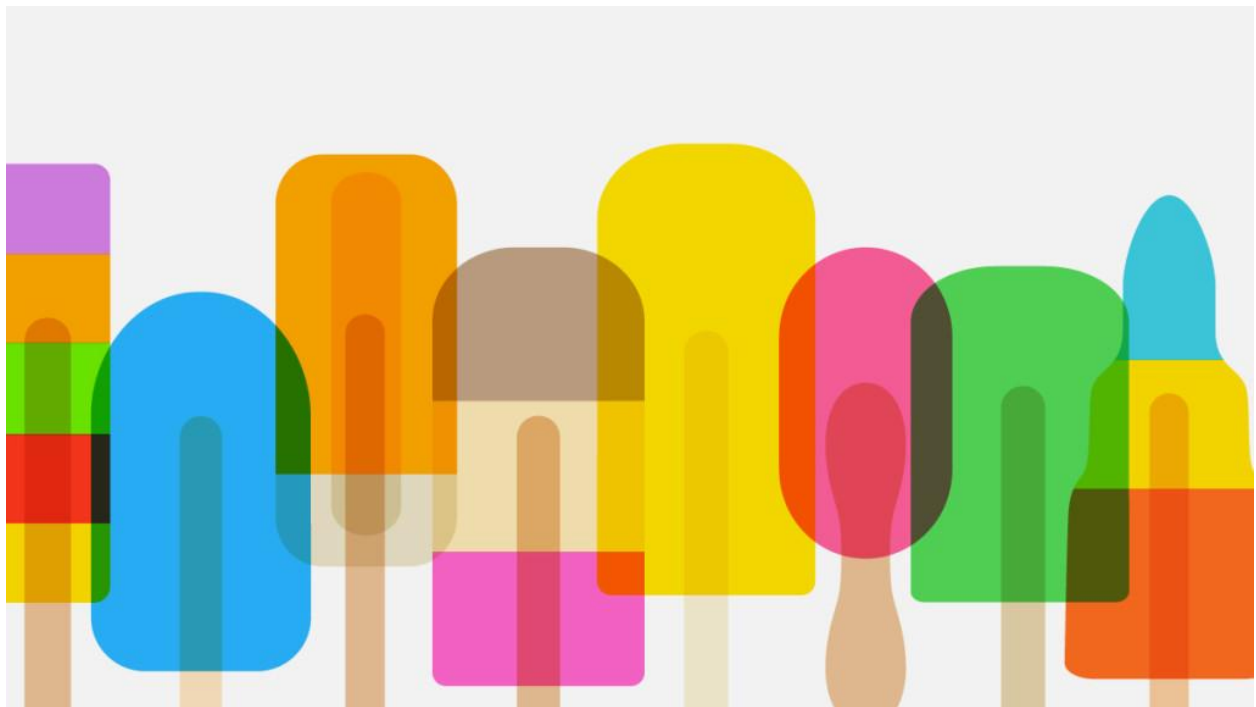# Getting Teams with Different Subcultures to Collaborate

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The term "organizational culture" can obscure an important truth: An organization often contains many cultures. This is true even if your organization is located entirely in one country, or even at one site.

Because each business unit or team may have their own subculture, working effectively across the organization requires skill in working across cultures.

Doing this requires three steps: understanding what culture is and how it works, identifying the cultures of your team and the teams you work with, and designing how you and the other teams will work together.

Understand what team culture is and how it works. A team's culture is its shared values and assumptions, and it results from a mix of elements: the organization, industry, geographic region and nation, and profession or function the team represents. Values are things we consider worth striving for, such as honesty, accountability, and

compassion. Assumptions are beliefs we hold about how the world works or how things are related. For example, you may assume that people generally want to do a good job, or that people are more committed to a decision when they are involved in making it. A team manifests its culture in many artifacts, including norms that lead members to act in certain ways and to create structures, processes, and policies. It's important to distinguish between a team's espoused culture and the one it operates from. The values that team members *say* they operate from are the espoused culture — which may or may not be what they actually operate from.

Identify your team's and other teams' cultures. To determine how cultures differ, you need to identify the values and assumptions that constitute them. And to do that you need to operate from the assumption that differences are opportunities for learning; if that thinking isn't already part of your culture, your joint exploration may quickly devolve into conflict as each team describes how the other's culture is a problem. To avoid this, consider finding a facilitator or consultant to help you.

Start by identifying artifacts that strike each team as notably different from its own. This includes norms, behaviors, structures, and processes. For example, you may notice that the team you're working with spends significant time trying to agree on what important words mean, while your team considers these detailed conversations to be a poor use of time. Or the other team may point out that your team deals with inter-team conflicts by raising the issue in the full inter-team meeting, while their team discusses conflicts in private.

Next, identify the assumptions and values that generate these artifacts. In the example above, your team raising conflicts in the full group may reflect your belief that conflict can best be resolved in the setting where all the information exists. The other team may assume that conflicts are best resolved in private where people are less likely to become embarrassed or defensive. I have found that organizational function is a significant part of team norms. Professions such as engineering and medicine, which are rooted in the scientific method, may value precision and logical reasoning more than other functions, for instance. To perform this step well, it's critical that you get curious about the other team's values and assumptions, instead of assuming you know the values or assumptions that explain the artifact. You can infer a team's culture from its artifacts, but you can't figure out whether your inference is correct without asking the team's members.

Finally, determine whether each artifact is shared, different but congruent, or conflicting. Conflicting artifacts are the most important to address because they present the greatest challenge to working together effectively.

Jointly design a solution for the different and conflicting values and assumptions. Focusing on the values and assumptions rather than on the artifacts is important both because it helps everyone understand the reasons behind each team's artifacts and because it helps you design solutions for norms, structures, and processes that are based on the same values and assumptions.

There are several options for designing a solution. If one team is particularly bound to its values and assumptions in a certain situation, the other team may decide simply to adopt that team's approach. For example, the team that discusses conflict privately may begin doing it in meetings if the other team makes a compelling case for it. Or the teams can develop a solution that integrates their cultures when the two are not necessarily incompatible. For example, the teams could agree to initially raise a conflict in private with the person who is most involved in solving it, and then jointly raise the issue with the larger team. Lastly, the teams can compromise when other options don't work. This may be the best solution you can develop, but because compromises don't resolve conflicting values and assumptions, they tend to leave everyone somewhat dissatisfied, so they may not create sustainable solutions. For example, the teams might agree to let each member decide on whether to raise a conflict privately or in the team.

Just as an effective team invests time and effort agreeing on how members will work together, so do teams that work effectively with each other.

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