

Conflict Management: Essential Skills For Expatriate Managers

Because no two individuals have exactly the same expectations and desires, conflict is a natural part of our interactions with others.

Thomas-Kilmann

Picture the scene. Alex has recently taken the role of Regional Head of Sales for Asia-Pacific and arrived in Singapore two weeks ago. She called a meeting with all the country sales managers to get a clear understanding of which markets are performing well and where more support is needed. The meeting started well but Alex quickly became frustrated that only a couple of the managers had prepared the detailed financial projections she had asked for. More time was spent discussing the strengths and weaknesses of various team members and the need for more resources. Several times she had to steer the discussion back on track and at the end of the allocated two hours she quickly wrapped up as she had another meeting scheduled straight after. Alex sent a follow up email that evening requesting more detailed figures and two days later she was disappointed only to have received one reply. It was going to be tough to

get this team into shape. Should she call another meeting and openly confront the managers about their lack of response? Or perhaps a private call with each individual would be better if only she could make the time? Maybe a reminder email would be the quickest way to deal with this and they would soon get to know her style?

We have all seen the surveys and know that a frequent cause of assignment failure or curtailment is poor cultural adaptation. When expatriate managers like Alex struggle to understand and respond appropriately to local norms and business practices, conflict can rear its ugly head and they find themselves feeling frustrated, anxious, stressed and sometimes unable to perform their role effectively. The impression of being in constant conflict and not having the tools to manage it appropriately sometimes leads to feelings of inadequacy and can have an impact on physical and psychological wellbeing. Not only does the expatriate manager underperform, but the local team can feel disempowered and their performance also suffers.

Universal Causes Of Conflict

Of course, conflict is a universal phenomenon and occurs not only between people from different cultures but also between those who share the same background: family members, neighbours or colleagues who grew up in the same city. Conflict in the workplace occurs for a multitude of reasons such as competition over scarce resources, power struggles, opposing priorities and goals, different personalities and temperaments and misaligned processes and policies.

Interpersonal And Intercultural Conflict

Misaligned policies can cause conflict for expatriate managers who are often tasked with implementing head office procedures within local operations and quickly discover that the online performance management system that works well for corporate HQ in New York is not appropriate in Dhaka or Kampala.

Cross-cultural conflict also occurs due to competing values or seemingly incompatible working preferences. A Norwegian investment manager working in the UK recently found himself in a serious

conflict with his senior management team when he sent a very frank note to a client questioning the ethics of a potential investment. He valued the absolute truth and found the British need for a more pragmatic approach and concern about possible litigation to be at odds with his sense of integrity. The conflict escalated and external help was required.

Consider also how contrasting attitudes to time, rules and forward planning could cause conflict. Or think about practices such as gift-giving, corporate hospitality or recruitment through personal connections and how they throw up questions around our definitions of ethics and what is 'right or wrong'.

Culture is the manner in which dilemmas are reconciled since every nation seeks a different and winding path to its own ideals of integrity.

Fons Trompenaars

Cross-Cultural Responses To Conflict

Conflict is more likely to occur in cross-cultural contexts and it is also harder to manage, partly because we don't have the same understanding of what has happened but also because people from different cultural backgrounds respond to and handle conflict very differently. A major factor in cross-cultural conflict management is the differences in how collectivist versus individualistic cultures¹ react to conflict. Individualistic cultures such as the USA tend to see conflict and disagreement as natural and place more value on

qualities such as ambition, competition and assertiveness. In collectivist cultures such as Japan, however, people are more likely to avoid conflict as maintaining the harmony of relationships and saving face are crucial. They tend to communicate indirectly and use avoiding tactics while people from individualistic cultures are more likely to confront conflict directly and show less sensitivity to preserving the relationship. This difference in approach can be magnified when hierarchy is in play. If the more senior person from head office is from an individualistic culture their subordinate from a collectivist culture will be even less inclined to express disagreement or confront conflict.

Pre-Departure Conflict Preparation

What can be done to help expatriate managers to prepare themselves for potential cross-cultural conflict before they embark on their overseas assignment?

Development of the following three areas can enable expatriates to manage conflict more effectively:

- Cultural knowledge – having a good grasp of local constraints, prevalent cultural values and working style preferences of local staff and partners can help managers who are new in town to be ready for and to understand behaviours and responses that are not always in line with their own
- Self-awareness – knowing how we come across and are perceived by others is important when dealing with conflict. Diagnostic tools such as The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument² can be useful in measuring individuals' natural predisposition to conflict
- Intercultural competence - developing qualities and skills such as flexible behaviour, rapport building, emotional resilience and empathy, will help international managers to resolve conflict more appropriately.

Resolving Conflict On The Ground

And what can expatriate managers do when they find themselves in a situation of potential conflict?

- Be ready to suspend judgement based on home cultural frames of reference – it is easy, but dangerous, to assume that what works well at home will work just as effectively in another part of the world
- Be wary of over-relying on national stereotypes - understanding the values and behavioural norms of the local culture can of course be useful but assuming, for example, that all your Chinese colleagues will respond to conflict in the same way is short-sighted, particularly if they have worked with

western colleagues for some time or been educated overseas

- Take time to listen to make sure you have all the facts and ask questions to help you gather information and to demonstrate that you are interested in understanding how things are done and why
- Tune into the subtext and listen for what is not being said. Learn how to interpret non-verbal signals and remember that in some parts of the world it can be very difficult to say 'no' to someone more senior, and so differences of opinion can be suppressed
- Give feedback based on your observations rather than your interpretations of behaviours you find challenging. For example, 'I noticed that you didn't make any contributions during the meeting' is better than 'you seemed very bored during the meeting – is there a problem?'

There are three sides to every story - yours, mine, and the truth.

Robert Evans

The Message For Global Mobility Managers

The message from all of this for global mobility managers is that we should be selecting expatriate managers with high levels of emotional and cultural intelligence. They will be more likely to cope with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations and to have the interpersonal skills to pre-empt, interpret and resolve conflictive situations. Luckily these skills can be developed and pre-departure preparation is also important. Intercultural training should go beyond country knowledge and should include cultural sensitisation and the development of practical skills such as communication and conflict management.

Conflict may be an inevitable part of an expatriate manager's working life, but how they respond to and resolve it might be the difference between a successful and unsuccessful assignment.

References

1. <https://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html>
2. <http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki>



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