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## SYNERGY FROM INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES: MAP BRIDGE INTEGRATE (MBI)

Many conflict situations arise from miscommunication between people who have different ways of seeing the same thing. For example, you have probably experienced something like this conversation that took place in a fast-moving consumer goods firm:

*New Divisional President:* Where are the proposed new product specifications? I thought we'd have them last week. I need them *now* so we can start planning production, suppliers, promotions, and everything else!

*Product Group Vice President:* There is no way we can have the specifications ready yet. Do you think we just pull these things out of the air? They'll be ready in two or three weeks.

*President:* We can't wait that long! Get them to me by the end of this week – I don't care what it takes. [to himself: No wonder the last president jumped ship. How can I turn this division around with this kind of incompetence to work with?]

*Vice President:* I'll see what I can do, but the process only goes so quickly. [to herself: *This is what happens when the company brings in someone from a different division! He just doesn't get it! It's going to take a long time for us to work with this guy. With any luck, he'll leave soon too.*]

A twenty-second interaction, one of a series over the first three weeks of the new president's tenure that resulted in a climate of mistrust, anger, and frustration. In this case – and many, many others we have seen – the escalation is fueled by relatively simple misinterpretations. The president and vice president have very different personalities. In particular, the president likes to see the big picture and possibilities first, then work from there to details. The vice president prefers the reverse: she likes to work with facts and details first, then build the big picture and possibilities.<sup>1</sup> This personality difference affects the kind of information each wants for decision-making around new product design. So when the president said “product specifications,” he meant “overall picture of product characteristics and value proposition, general descriptions of manufacturing processes and supplier types.” Expecting an overall picture at this stage is probably reasonable. But when the vice president *heard* “product specifications,” she assumed it meant detailed and specific physical, chemical and electronic information; a set of information that was reasonably not yet available. The feelings of incompetence and mistrust grew from miscommunication, not from business realities of what was actually available at the time of their exchange.

### Personal Characteristics Affect Interpersonal Communication

Our personality, culture, professional experience, gender, and other background characteristics provide filters for how we interact with the world around us. They influence what we notice, what meaning we give to events, and what actions we decide to take. Because everyone has a different combination of characteristics and experiences, everyone sees different things, and understands them a bit differently. Of course there is substantial overlap and agreement, which allows us to communicate and work together in the first place. But we focus here on the differences for two reasons. First, the differences cause a lot of problems and barriers when they are not recognized. We have seen far too many working relationships and teams degenerate

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<sup>1</sup> This is the intuition (President) vs Sensing (Vice President) dimension on the Myers-Briggs Typology Index (MBTI<sup>®</sup>) personality index.

because of *unrecognized* different interpretations of the same information or event – like the simple case above. Second, the differences offer opportunities for innovation, creativity, and higher performance. We all know intuitively that different opinions can provide healthy dialogue and debate and, ideally, a synthesis or integration that is better than any one point of view. But achieving this synthesis requires recognizing and working with differences in the first place.

We have worked with hundreds of people and teams to prevent the problems that come from differences *and* to achieve the potential that the differences offer. We've found that following three basic principles of interaction leads to success: Map, Bridge, and Integrate.

## Map: Understand the Differences

When people talk with each other, they tend to focus on what they have in common. That keeps things moving, but also leads to the working assumption that *everything* is commonly understood. The result is a situation like the opening conversation. Mapping is recognizing that differences exist and may be important, describing the differences with an objective framework, using this map to explain different perspectives, and then acting on the explanations to deal better with the work challenges.

A good geographic map – such as a map of the Alps – satisfies three criteria. It shows the important features of the terrain; the features that are landmarks for navigation or decision-making, whether you plan to hike, bike, or ski. It helps the map-reader locate himself on the map, locate destinations, and see the distance between the various points. Finally, it provides some guidance for getting from Point A (the map reader's location) to Point B (the desired destination). To create a good map, a cartographer uses objective data and updates the map with new information whenever necessary.

A good map of personal backgrounds has exactly the same features. It is a framework that identifies the important dimensions of differences between people; the differences that play a role in working together and decision-making. It helps each person describe his or her own characteristics in objective ways, and compare them with those of other people, identifying the extent of similarities and differences. Finally, it provides information to help people explain and interpret various events by bridging distances. Good interpersonal maps are built using objective data and frameworks, and revised with new information about people and the dimensions.

Just as the Alps can be mapped in many different ways (altitude contours, roads, walking paths, large or small scale, etc.), people and their background characteristics can be mapped in many different ways. Depending on the situation, it may be important to map characteristics of personality, function or profession, national or organizational culture, gender, or other dimensions. As a general guideline, we find that two maps cover most work situations and provide an important starting point for achieving synergy from differences: 1)cognitive preferences (for example, as measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI®), and 2)cultural assumptions (for example, as measured by the Cultural Perspectives Questionnaire, CPQ).

The *cognitive preferences map* describes individual tendencies with respect to cognitive and emotional energy, information intake, and decision-making criteria. The opening example showed differences in information intake (starting with big picture versus details). In this situation, the president and vice president also differed in their source of energy. The president was a strong introvert, getting energy from within and preferring to reflect internally on information and decisions before engaging with others. The vice president was a strong extravert, getting energy from interacting with other people and preferring to discuss decisions openly before coming to closure. Until these two mapped their differences, the president thought the vice president was someone who constantly changed her mind (why else would she need to keep discussing decisions?), while the vice president thought the president was withholding information and didn't trust the team (why else would he keep everything to himself?). By mapping their cognitive preferences, the president and vice president re-interpreted many past events and understood their destructive reactions.

The *cultural assumptions map* describes individual expectations about group and organizational

characteristics with respect to responsibility and power, interaction with the environment, mode of activity, nature of humans, space and time.<sup>2</sup> These differences are rarely discussed in any setting, partly because most of us are unaware of their influence on our behavior. Instead they remain hidden as underlying sources of our conflicts about work priorities, organizing principles, and norms for interaction between leaders and subordinates or among team members. Mapping this set of differences surfaces the tensions and is especially important when the interaction crosses cultural boundaries between or within countries.

## Bridge: Communicate Across Differences

Bridging increases effective communication by paying particular attention to interacting across differences. It requires practicing three sets of communication skills: Preparing a Foundation, Decentering, and Recentering.

**Preparing a Foundation.** Attitude may not be everything, but it certainly counts for a lot. In bridging, two attitudes provide the right starting point. First, the people involved must be *motivated to understand each other*. In other words, they have to *want* to listen to what the other person says, from his or her own point of view. Second, they must be *confident* that, by working together, mutual understanding can be achieved. In the case described above, neither party was really very interested in understanding the other side – they were both more interested in persuading the other of their own point of view. Nor did anyone show confidence that they would eventually understand the other.

Attitudes are internal states, and we can control them. We don't have to rely on someone else's actions to become motivated or confident ourselves. With the right attitude from the beginning, you create the kind of environment that fosters effective communication.

**Decentering.** Decentering is moving away from your own “center,” thinking and communicating from the point of view of the other person. It comes from practising two important skills: perspective-taking and impartial-exploring. *Perspective-taking* is trying to see things from the other's view and acting on that view. It is grounded on good mapping. For example, once the president knew that the vice president looked at details first, he became more specific in his requests to her. Once the vice president understood that her boss processed decisions internally and was not intending to withhold information, she began to ask him for his thoughts in a particular direction rather than waiting for him to share.

*Impartial-exploring* kicks in when a problem occurs. In these situations, poor communicators tend to blame the other party, attributing negative characteristics to the other party or simply dismissing the other view (“He doesn't know what he's doing,” “She is incompetent.”). Good bridgers assume right away that the problem arose from differences in starting points or perspectives on the problem. They withhold blame and negative judgement, and explore the nature of the different perspectives. The president could have said “Why don't you show me what you've got already?”, the vice president could have said “What kind of information would you like at this point? Here's what I can give you as a start.” This impartial exploring, combined with perspective-taking and good mapping, usually leads to insights and new ways of seeing the situation.

**Recentering.** Recentering is moving both parties – or a whole team – to a center they identify together. While decentering focuses on differences, recentering builds on similarities. Good recentering means developing a common view and common norms. To develop a *common view*, the people involved map the situation and their perspectives to identify areas of overlap. Both the president and vice president want the new product to satisfy the right consumer needs. Although this seems obvious, when the people involved have different perspectives it is important to say it explicitly and describe it carefully. Usually people assume they have a common view but really don't (e.g., the meaning of “product specifications” or “sharing decisions”). Good decentering often produces the type of discussion that identifies the real common view, providing a

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<sup>2</sup> This map is described more fully in the document “The Impact of Culture on Work,” by J. DiStefano & M. Maznevski, IMD Classroom note, 2000.

foundation for innovation and synergy.

*Common norms* are agreements on how to interact together. People go into meetings and conversations with expectations about behavior like interruptions, conflict, and progress towards decisions. The agreements for common norms can be about what to do, such as always start a meeting with an agenda, or about what *not* to do, such as trying to be funny by ridiculing someone. When people have different expectations about these behaviors, they often misinterpret each other's actions. To communicate effectively across differences, people in a discussion or team must identify these different expectations and then agree on some common behaviors and their meanings. Usually they choose a combination of each party's norms; the most skilled communicators agree explicitly that the different people can operate using different communication behaviors, with common agreement about what those behaviors mean.

To recenter, the president and vice president could agree that both will process decisions internally and share only when they've decided (the president's norm). Even better – they could agree that when the president didn't share his thoughts the vice president would understand that he was processing internally, and that when the vice president talked through decisions out loud she really needed the president's input to help her own thinking. The vice president could let the president know when she thought she was being left out of decisions, and he could make an effort to include her earlier. Note, however, that such insightful bridging depends on accurate mapping.

### **Integrate – Build on Differences for Synergy**

Integrating is the last step in getting high performance from interpersonal differences. The skills needed here are much the same as they are in any team situation, but they lead to better quality decisions and implementation when they are built on strong mapping and bridging. The three integrating skills are managing participation, resolving conflicts, and building on ideas.

*Managing participation* is clearly the first step to creating and implementing new ideas. It is impossible to build high quality solutions unless you have everyone's input – their *best* ideas – to start with. And people contribute their best ideas in a setting that fits their personality and expectations. The key here is to engage in different modes of participation across a decision-making task: in small groups, large groups, and one-to-one; in writing, pictures, and spoken dialogue; in-person and electronically. This way, people can provide their best input in a comfortable manner, and respond to others on their own terms. The leader should play an active role in balancing the different modes, ensuring that everyone is contributing and responding. The biggest challenge is keeping track of ideas shared in different formats – shared electronic spaces are especially helpful in this respect.

When two people or a group are trying to get synergy from their differences, they will face significant disagreement: "Okay, I understand your perspective, but I still don't agree." The next challenge is to *resolve conflicts constructively*. One often-forgotten step is to detect disagreement in the first place. Different people and cultures express conflict differently, and these signals are often misread. The parties should make extra efforts to deal with the conflict in appropriate ways – as relevant disagreement among people who respect and understand each other, rather than as a battle for right and wrong. In our research and experience, mapping and bridging provide exactly the tools needed for good conflict resolution. Mapping the different perspectives provides an objective picture of how far apart the parties are and ideas for how to create new solutions. Bridging brings positive attitudes and behaviors that create win-win solutions. And if participation is managed well, all parties will contribute to the solution and are likely to buy into it, implementing it well.

Good mapping and bridging also help with the final step in creating value. *Building on ideas* is going beyond resolving differences to create new solutions for problems and challenges. This is when leaders and their subordinates reach new levels of innovation in revenue, cost, and organizational systems. It is how key account teams develop systems that compel customers, and how logistics and operations teams find real synergies across value chains, far beyond the cost-cutting that comes from eliminating redundancies. To build on ideas, use all the techniques you've experienced, heard about, and read about, including brainstorming and creative exercises.

At first focus on exploring differences rather than similarities, building on each others' ideas, and trying to invent new ideas. Then, using conflict resolution skills, do more than combine and compromise. Find new solutions that excite everyone.

In the opening case, after mapping and bridging their differences, the president and vice president worked together to develop the new product and the systems to support it. They went through successive iterations of looking at the overall picture and how the product would meet various needs, and details of components and supplies. After some tough discussions, they created some new features that customers hadn't originally asked for, but that met other needs the distributors had. And, through careful examination of the supplier and manufacturing side, they were able to decrease costs and increase production efficiency. The launch was later than the company had hoped, but the product did well and became the anchor of a new line. Along the way, the president and vice president learned to incorporate the interaction skills into other projects they were working on, which also benefitted from the process.

## Summary

The most frequent response to differences is to downplay them: "Our differences are minor and unimportant, let's focus on the areas we have in common." Although intuitively appealing, this strategy leads to mediocre performance, not high performance. Focusing only on commonalities gets to the lowest common denominator, it doesn't create new innovations or better ways of doing things. Differences provide the ingredients for creativity and innovation, but focusing only on differences leads to a negative spiral of blame and distrust. The Map-Bridge-Integrate process uses an objective assessment of differences *and* similarities as input for an ongoing dialogue. In this dialogue, original areas of commonality serve as the foundation for discussing differences, and new areas of commonality are built.

Mapping, bridging and integrating must work together. Performance comes from integrating, but integrating cannot happen without bridging. In fact, according to our research studies, good bridging *almost always* leads to good integrating. If you get bridging right, you'll almost certainly get integrating and the accompanying performance. Bridging, in turn, rests on good mapping. Maps provide the objective input for building bridges; both the attitudes and the skills.

The MBI process can't be put in place with policies. It is a set of skills that must be practiced and learned over time. The good news is that even a little bit of MBI brings an improvement in performance, and people tend to see quick results in their interactions.

In today's economic environment, every leader needs to accomplish more with the human resources he or she has. Map-Bridge-Integrate is a good set of practices for achieving that goal.