Cultural Differences At Work Matter

In today's world where everyone is constantly traveling and living around the world, people are exposed to multicultural settings in their daily lives, including at work. This might enable people to adapt to other cultures and thus cultural differences will cease to exist which then makes it inconsequential or unimportant. I disagree with this view, because interactions with other cultures do not make you simply adapt to them. Facing cultural differences at work has its challenges which makes an individual's job experience tougher. This would then lead to implications faced by employees and teams at work, ultimately affecting the organization as a whole. Therefore, cultural differences cause a wide range of issues, which makes it significant at work and thus cultural differences indeed matter. I will explain my view in the rest of the essay, which will be structured as follows: First, I will discuss why cultural differences still exist despite people living and traveling all over the world. Second, I will elaborate on the challenges that arise due to cultural differences. Third, I will discuss the negative consequences directly affecting employees and teams. Lastly, I will discuss the implications faced by organizations.

Indians and Chinese, in their native cultures, traditionally have low achievement motivation but outside their native cultures, they tend to achieve a significant amount of economic success (Sanchez-Runde and Steers, 2001). Although this suggests that people are able to break away from their native culture and adjust to the environment they are currently in, it is not always straightforward. Cultural differences at work will not be easily eliminated and they still exist as people do not easily adapt to their surroundings and lose their cultural beliefs or practices. Schein (1985) recognized that culture is deep and multi-layered into: observable artifacts, values and norms, and underlying assumptions. The deepest layer explains that culture is something that is ingrained deep within an individual, beliefs that they are not even aware of holding them. Therefore, an individual's cultural beliefs are not easily altered once they travel or move to another part of the world as those beliefs make an individual into the person they are. For example, as put forward by Tannen (1995), men and women have different linguistic styles as we learn ways of speaking growing up as children, and children tend to play with their same gender. Boys tend to learn conversational practices that concentrate on status dimension while girls concentrate on rapport dimension of relationships. As we can see in today's world, even with frequent interaction between men and women, the differences in linguistic styles between the two genders still exist. This proves that an individual's practices and beliefs that were built since a young age will remain as one's identity. Moreover, adapting to the nation's culture takes time and, in the case, where an individual manages to adapt to a number of practices or beliefs of the residing country, he would still need to work with other people who have not yet adapted, as people will be constantly moving and traveling in today's dynamic world. Therefore, cultural differences at work will always exist and they matter.

Having established that cultural differences at work exist, this essay will now consider the challenges that arise due to these differences that create barriers to a team's success. Firstly, communication problems. Brett et al. (2006) identified direct versus indirect communication and trouble with accents and fluency at the workplace. In addition to that, Tannen (1995) suggests that there are different linguistic styles, social dynamics of language, conversational rituals and ways of negotiating authority. These differences could cause confusion and miscommunication between two parties as they misunderstood each other's words when a party is being indirect

but the other party is used to direct communication or simply due to not understanding another person's accent. Also, there could be a problem of not being able to voice out and thus not getting heard because of differences in turn-taking versus interrupting habits or differences in pause duration that is considered 'long enough' to permit interruption. Secondly, difference in power distance. This issue has been highlighted by Brett et al. (2006), Witt and Stahl (2016), Rockstuhl et al. (2012) and Cole et al. (2013) which proves its significance at the workplace. A compatibility in leader-team power distance values would mean that both entities accept similar approaches in hierarchical decision making (Cole et al., 2013). Therefore, incongruence in power distance values will cause tension within the team as team members with low power distance would get offended if their leader does not include the team in decision making or a leader with high power distance not tolerating disagreement from team members. Thirdly, contrasts in beliefs about their obligations toward various stakeholders. Some people would prioritize shareholders' goals while some would prioritize the needs of other stakeholders such as employees and customers. Also, different organizations would have different goals as some would give primacy to economic success while some aim to achieve the "triple bottom line" which focuses on economic, social and environmental sustainability (Witt and Stahl, 2016). This would influence the degree of an organization's commitment to its corporate social responsibility (CSR) as we can see in today's world where there are companies that focus on giving back to society more than others. Witt and Stahl (2016) mentioned that senior executives' expectations about the two subjects will be shaped by the dominant native cultural values. Therefore, employees' and leaders' contrasting priorities would cause disruptions at work as different entities are working for different goals and beliefs. Lastly, different perspectives on diversity at work. Ely and Thomas (2001) identified three perspectives, integration-and-learning; access-and-legitimacy; discrimination-and-fairness, and they place different levels of value on workplace cultural diversity. Therefore, those who do not value cultural diversity would perceive other cultures as competition and this would cause distrust and tension within the team. As cultural differences at work create challenges as mentioned earlier, this would inevitably lead to negative consequences which directly affect employees and teams.

Building on from the idea that cultural differences causes challenges at work, this section will illustrate how those challenges negatively affect employees and teams in organizations. Firstly, it affects the procedural justice climate (PJC), which Cole et al. (2013,p. 963) defined as "an emergent state that reflects how fairly the team as a whole is treated procedurally by authority figures." The fairness perception of employees would especially be affected by a mismatch in power distance levels when they perceive leaders as violating their expectations of discussing and consulting the team before deciding, which would disrupt leader-team interactions. Cole et al. (2013) found that PJC will fall more abruptly when the leader's power distance is higher than the team's. Therefore, when the leader's power distance is lower than the team's, it will cause employees to feel uncomfortable to work with their leaders but are treated fairly while in the situation where the leader's power distance is higher than the team's, employees feel disrespected and are treated unfairly and thus PJC declines more sharply. Secondly, weak leader trust. The level of trust employees has for their leaders relates to the quality of relationship and treatment received. (Rockstuhl et al., 2012). Therefore, poor leader-team relationship would cause distrust within the team and it would be difficult for the team to work collectively in completing a task. Thirdly, lower quality of intergroup relations and weak organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Conflict resulting from miscommunication, contrasts in beliefs about obligations toward various stakeholders and different perspectives on the value of cultural identities which includes differences in point of view and perceived level of power and status could negatively affect employees' relationship with each other. These conflicts will

create barriers between team members and it would be difficult for them to get along and agree on certain matters. This would then lead to weak OCB among the employees and could cause a team to collapse as the five OCB facets which are altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue (Cole et al., 2013) are extremely important for a team to work effectively. Fourth, feeling less valued and respected. For those with access-and-legitimacy and discrimination-and-fairness perspectives, employees of color feel less respected and devalued just because they are minority racial/ethnic groups at work (Ely and Thomas, 2001). Also, having a contradicting belief about the salience of different stakeholders and CSR would cause an individual to feel his beliefs are devalued and disrespected by the firm as it does not fit with the organization's culture. Lastly, the consequences faced by employees mentioned before would definitely cause job dissatisfaction and decreases group functioning. This is because employees would have low morale and would not enjoy their job as much as they would like due to the cultural barriers which stem from one's identity. It might seem like a dead-end problem as changing an individual's habits and beliefs is not a menial task. These consequences on employees and teams listed earlier will then affect the bigger picture, which is the organization.

The implications faced by organizations will be elaborated in this section and it would explain why cultural differences at work matter. Firstly, work motivation of employees will drop. Employees would only be motivated to work if they receive a fair reward, which includes benefits beyond their salary. If cultural differences at work causes challenges and consequences that lowers employees' job satisfaction, they might be less motivated to work to their best abilities. The level of achievement motivation within a nation influences the extent of entrepreneurial behavior and economic development (Sanchez-Runde and Steers, 2001). This suggests that the level of work motivation relates to a company's success in achieving its goals. The reason behind it is, an individual's level of motivation affects the amount of effort he puts into completing a task which would be reflected in the quality of work. Therefore, a high level of motivation would result in high-quality work and ultimately achieving the company's goals. This shows a strong relation to the second implication, lower work performance, but the relationship is not always straightforward. Sanchez-Runde and Steers (2001) acknowledged that high performance is not affected by motivation alone but employees require other performance contingencies such as personal skills and the necessary tools and technology for task completion. However, employee motivation remains an important factor in ensuring work performance as Cole et al. (2013) explained that employees are more likely to fulfill their roles and exert effort that would benefit the group when they feel their interests are safeguarded. Therefore, problems caused by cultural differences would threaten employees' welfare, resulting in loss of interest to genuinely help the organization and give their best potential. This might cause them to be a liability to the organization, instead of an asset. Lastly, work attitude of workers will be negatively impacted. A positive work attitude would lead to higher commitment levels compared to a negative work attitude. For example, after-work socializing among Japanese workers (tsukiai) is a common culture (Sanchez-Runde and Steers,2001). This strengthens the relationship among themselves and thus with the company, but it is not always straightforward as Rockstuhl et al. (2012) found that members with high power distance has stronger role-based loyalty and thus leaders' treatment towards them has less effect on work attitude compared to employees with low power distance. However, Sanchez-Runder and Steers (2001) mentioned that their commitment may decrease in an increasing emphasis on performance-based pay raises. This shows that incongruence in power distance values long with other challenges and consequences of cultural differences will cause negative work attitude and employees to distance themselves from other workers and the organization which would then result in weak relationship ties between the stakeholders of the firm. The implications

which organizations face that were explained earlier show that cultural differences at work would affect a firm's functioning and the process in accomplishing its goals.

In conclusion, as people are traveling and living around the world, this is the exact reason why cultural differences exist in the first place. Being in multicultural settings does not make an individual adapt to other cultures because adapting takes time and culture is an individual's identity that cannot be easily altered. Therefore, this causes challenges faced at work such as communication problems, incongruence of power distance values, contrasts in beliefs about their obligations toward various stakeholders and various perspectives on diversity at work. Furthermore, negative consequences are faced directly by employees and teams due to the cultural difference challenges. PJC is negatively affected, leader trust weakens, quality of intergroup relations declines, poor OCB and individuals feel less respected and devalued. This would then inevitably bring implications to organizations as work motivation along with work performance declines and work attitude becomes increasingly negative. Therefore, cultural differences at work matter and they need to be addressed in order to improve the organization's functioning. An example would be structural intervention by reorganizing teams to reduce interpersonal friction or remove a source of conflict. Moreover, managerial intervention to solve team problems or set guidelines so the team have effective processes when faced with challenges. Consequently, if the issues caused by cultural differences at work are not managed, it will diminish the benefits of having a multicultural setting and ultimately weaken the organization.