

The ALIGN project - Phase 2

If global leadership teams are able to apply cultural diversity wisely, it can create innovation and effective decision making. Instead of striving to neutralize diversity in teams it is more beneficial to display, explore and work with differences as a productive force in leadership.

ALIGN has found that cultural diversity is often perceived as beneficial for the team, however it is rarely put into play. It is not the professional background and knowledge that are a challenge, it is rather the cultural prejudices and management styles that challenge the team dynamics. Most global leadership teams are of the impression that it takes a neutral culture to overcome such challenges, yet ALIGN recognizes the possibilities and potential gains connected to the enhancement and utilization of cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity enables global leadership teams to create more innovative solutions to complex problems and thereby stronger decision making.

"To succeed in business today you need ideas coming from every perspective and background."

Nancy Lee, Diversity Chief, Google.

ALIGN is a research-based innovation project. The project is managed by UKON A/S in collaboration with Department of Global Studies at Aarhus University and Innovation Fund Denmark. ALIGN is short for *Advancing Leadership Teamwork in Global Enterprises*. ALIGN's ambition is to create new knowledge on leadership teams as global leadership hubs, as well as to gather experience on how to further improve methods for building more successful global teamwork in leadership.

Through ALIGN you will get a unique chance to create a deeper understanding of the dynamics at stake in your own global leadership team. You will be able to develop and strengthen your global leadership team when participating in ALIGN's phase 2, where the first results of the study will be tested.

Theoretical stand and temporary results

The last 10-15 years of research within cultural diversity in teams primarily sees diversity as a challenge - it is treated as a detrimental issue. In ALIGN we work with diversity as an untapped potential – it is treated as a prerequisite for creating innovative solutions. Therefore, we are investigating how global leadership teams are working, what cultural diversity means to those teams, and under what circumstances does diversity add value or become a challenge.

Culture is not static nor stabile. We are not born with a cultural DNA linked to a specific nationality. Culture affects our mentality, values and behavioral patterns. Culture is particularly dynamic in the globalized world we are living in. The context we are in characterizes and co-defines us and the culture we hold. We are moving around the world and assimilate what we meet. Thus, team leaders do not have a fixed cultural imprinting as much literature and organizational cultural behavioral patterns revolves around.

Through 41 interviews with members from various global leadership teams, we have asked leaders what cultural dynamics they experience in their team, what kind of diversity they see, and what culture means to them.

We have found the following six dimensions of cultural diversity to recur in every interview:

- 1) There is a difference in relations and reactions towards power and authority.
- 2) Various communication styles (direct vs. indirect).
- 3) Various ways of avoiding losing face.
- 4) Different approach to issue and conflict solving (detailed vs. effective/quickly).
- 5) Humor and small talk is perceived and attributed differently.
- 6) Differences in developing, engaging in, and responding to trust and relations within leadership teams.

The teams in question are all actively trying to work around the challenges the six dimensions entails. However, by solely searching for common ground and agreement, the added value diversity and different perspectives contributes with in a constructive exchange of knowledge, can easily get lost. The diversity calls for and enables greater creativity and more holistic viable decisions.

Virtual methods for developing global leadership teams

Throughout ALIGN's second phase UKON has developed four virtual methods that allows the consultants to interact with the global leadership teams and provide interventions. A combination of the methodologies will often give the global leadership teams a more thorough and effective developmental push.

Data collection and team assessment:

Data-oriented: The team provides data to the consultant via a questionnaire/test, which will solely be a written correspondence. The consultants provide a short report with the general picture and recommendations for further action.

Interviews via phone calls or skype with the individual team members one at the time. The information is gathered and used to provide a basis for establishing a shared picture of the situation in the organization.

Learning sessions and interventions:

Consultative method: A theme or organizational issue is chosen based on the data collection or assessment. The consultants and the entire team attend a 2 hour skype meeting facilitated by the consultants.

Dialogue-democratic method: Based on the data collection and assessment, feedback is presented to the team via Skype and possibilities for further development are addressed, discussed and planed.

When deciding on what methods are the best for the team in question, it is important to look at what the purpose of the meeting is and what the desired outcomes are. The methods are decided in close dialogue with the leadership team's leader. It is also possible to arrange physical meetings and work with the global leadership team face to face if located in Denmark.