

## CASE STUDY (2)

### INTEGRATING AND OPENING TO DIVERSITY – ENGINEERING STUDENTS

Consultant/case author:

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Areas:

cross-cultural and communication trainings, diversity management

#### Brief

I was introduced to the Diversity Icebreaker in September 2009 when Bjørn Ekelund did a workshop at the York Associates/Dialogin Conference on High Performing International Teams in York. Please imagine an auditory full of intercultural trainers and experts who enjoyed trying out this tool immensely (at least, my group did, but we were the red ones and quite happy being together as a group, anyway).

What makes the Diversity Icebreaker so special and such a great tool to work with? I would like to use a case study put together from experiences using the DI in three groups of engineering students: one multicultural, one Indian and one Chinese, to share some ideas on working with the Diversity Icebreaker.

Let's imagine a group of students reading engineering at university. They all are going to be not only engineers; they will work in international environments, either as part of an international team or leading international teams.

The first group was quite a diverse group of such students, consisting of German, Indian, Brazilian and Chinese people. The idea was to get them to know each other and to improve their skills of working together.

The department this first group was with was very pleased with the outcome. As they had partner universities in China and India, they asked me to do the same workshop in those countries as well. I was looking forward to that, as it allowed for a comparison of a classical multi-cultural with a supposedly mono-cultural environment. Would the new equations of people in the same country doing things differently, and people in different countries doing things the same way hold to some extent?

#### Action

##### Multicultural group

In case of the first, multicultural group, the standard approach would have been to look into intercultural differences and learn how to respect them. Respect is always a good thing, but often such approaches lead to a reinforcement of cultural stereotypes thus hindering effective cooperation more than helping it on an interpersonal level (he is Russian, so he will do this or that). If you follow the general intercultural assumption: people in different countries do things differently, then in reversal, the assumption would be: people in the same country do things the same way. Well, we

only need to look at our neighbours and colleagues or fellow students to know that this is not the case.



Figure 1. We have all three colours in us!

Let's therefore jumble up the old ones to generate two new assumptions: people in the same country do things differently, which in reversal would lead to the conclusion that people in different countries do things the same way. That is also a kind of generalisation, for sure; however, it focuses on trying to build the common ground. It also highlights that differences may turn up where least expected, i.e. at home. The key would be then to recognise differences at an interpersonal level, and to put them to use in a team while searching for some common ground at the same time.

In pursuit of that goal, I introduced my students to the Diversity Icebreaker seminar, where they learn about their own preferences at first. The good thing about the Diversity Icebreaker is that no person can only be mono-coloured: all three aspects are there, only the weighting is different. And because a colour code is used, it is easy to remember and, most importantly, it is non-discriminatory: I am not overlooking details or being ambitious: I am green. I am not always worried and try to please people: I am red. I am not a nerd who can't talk to people: I am blue. My students enjoyed that very much, and tensions that had been in the group before eased significantly. When asked to group themselves according to their strongest colour, it also became obvious that nationality or gender is no clue to a specific behaviour: all engineering student had a strong blue element which makes the icebreaker also an attractive tool for team building within certain professional groups.

Nevertheless, the highest blue score was with a German male. The Chinese, who one might have expected to be in the red group, mostly ended up in the green group, so did the students from Brazil. The Indians were dominantly red, but often the differences in the score were marginal. One woman who had quite a balanced score, however, felt so unhappy in the green group that she asked for a transfer to the blue group. Of course, this is an important learning element: we like working with people who are like us. And we interpret other people's behaviour according to our colour code. This behaviour becomes very obvious when the groups have to a) describe themselves and b) describe the other groups.

Comparing these results, one of the students worded this very well: "The green group has all the bright ideas, then the blue people to do the work and if there is a problem, you call for the red guys." (You may guess which colour preference he was). He immediately grasped what the whole thing was about: you need a strong element of diversity in your team to make it effective. You must make sure that all roles and functions are covered, and that will not be the case if all people are like you. Without the green element, the blues will work, but lose themselves in detail and no result will be achieved. Conflict negotiation, say, in a new software project, between blue ("We need more testing!") and green ("We need to go live!") will often be done by the reds. At least, in theory.

After the analytical work and the discussion, the engineering students had to act out a role play: a negotiation on building a gas pipeline through a wildlife reserve in South America. It would be possible to group teams as mono-coloured and multi-coloured to see if there is a difference in the way of negotiating and achieving an outcome. Nevertheless, for time reasons and the idea behind it

(learning to work in a diverse team), the students here were asked to work in multi-coloured teams and had to assign roles appropriately.

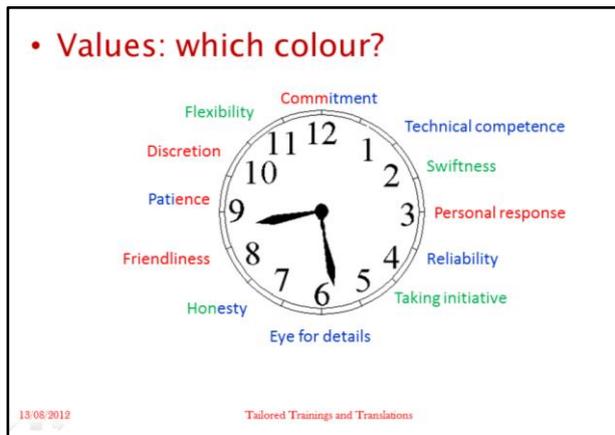


Figure 2. Dealing with customers.

However, always expect the unexpected: what became obvious was that you will be most successful if you are able to adapt your strategy: one of the students realised that his blue, matter-of-fact approach did not get him anywhere, so he started to argue and communicate along green patterns, having identified the decision maker in the other group as green and using a language that person could understand. This is another important learning element: you have all three colours in you, so you should learn to activate and make use of them when needed. For

myself, who has a very balanced score (30 red, 27 blue, 27 green), this is not particularly difficult (and it does help when working as a trainer). For the highly blue engineering student (who had a very low red score of 17) activating his red part would require a lot of work and support, I guess. In addition, when communicating with others, you need to be able to identify their colour preferences, something that was practiced in follow-up workshops.

The first stop was China, where, generally, the scores were more balanced than in the first mixed group of students. But even here there were students with a high blue score and students with equal red and green scores. The balance sometimes led to confusion in the self-description of the groups as things were perceived as both green and red. The discussion, given their study programme and their future work, focused on the practical use of such a tool. Again, people enjoyed the apparent simplicity of the tool: to understand and use it, students do not need tons of literature or a deep psychological background.

In India, the students did sessions on functions related to recruiting team members: given anonymous scores of other students in the group, they had to build teams and assess how effective they would be. Engineering students, as you may guess, did this quite mathematically, starting on coordinate grids and functions: most of the groups used their blue potential to work out the teams. The results were impressive, and they learned that – even without much training on HR issues – you should make decisions on who to work with on a specific project by looking at more than the technical skills.

Other role plays here included conflict management, i.e. analysing the root cause of a conflict and trying to mediate it. Again, the colour code came in very useful: instead of accusing other members of unacceptable behaviour (“He never listens!” – “She never completes any task I give her!”) the colours help to boil tension down and see things in a different way: he is green, she is blue, so we need to find a way to communicate in the respective language. As conflicts between superior and subordinate roles are often very sensitive, this approach is very helpful indeed.

There were two more options that were explored together with the students here: recognising colour codes and preferences in others, for example, fictitious customers (customers in a very broad sense, i.e. people of companies they may have to deal with or they may meet at trade fairs); and giving feedback to others. The latter one also revealed that the Diversity Icebreaker can be used together with other tools as it helps to see feedback in perspective and to approach different colours for different opinions on one's work to get a more comprehensive view.

Criteria: **II**

- Strong Area Skills
- Communication
- Client Orientation

**IV** Ranking Based on Criteria **I**

	B	R	G	Rank
1	31	26	27	
2	33	26	25	
3	34	24	26	
4	39	25	17	

	B	R	G	Rank
1	4	3	2	1
2	3	3	2	2
3	2	2	2	4
4	3	3	2	3

I → VAL/PER TEAM MEMBER

Figure 3 Recruiting a diverse team, India.

When dealing with customers it became clear that there should be one face to the customer, and that this does not need to be the red person: blue customers would love facts and information, green customers need to see the long-term benefit of a service. This is also true when we talk about internal customers, i.e. stakeholders who you want to convince of a certain project.

## Results

One has to be aware that normally engineering programs at universities do not include managerial skills – the programmes are mostly very fact and information related, that is, quite blue. Career options, intercultural or leadership skills are usually not included although a lot of specialist engineers will need them later. Thus the students were quite grateful for being introduced to a tool that can be of multi-purpose, as it is useful for recruiting team members (or new hires in general), and for conflict management as well as for communicating with customers or preparing negotiations.

Below is the summary of the most important learning points for the students from the two sessions using the classical Diversity Icebreaker seminar and role-play exercises built on Blue, Red, and Green:

- Diversity is essential for building an effective team; you must cover all roles and functions, and you will not be successful in doing that if all the team members are like you.
- You will be most successful if you are able to adapt your strategy; you have all three colours in you, so you should learn to activate and make use of them when needed.
- Neither nationality nor gender is an absolute determinant of a specific behaviour.
- We like working with people who are like us and we interpret other's behaviour according to our colour code.
- Different people are needed in different stages of the process.
- You should make decisions on who to work with on a specific project by considering more than just the technical skills.
- The three-colour structure helps to boil down the tension and see things in a different way: "he is green, she is blue, so we need to find a way to communicate in the respective language"; it also helps to see feedback in perspective and to approach different colours for different opinions on one's work to get a more comprehensive view.

In general, after this kind of pilot projects, I am glad that my engineering students – no matter what colour – welcomed the Diversity Icebreaker and I guess it is its universal approach that makes it so unique.

**About the author:**

Kirsten Waechter, born in 1968, is a qualified freelance trainer and translator of intercultural communication and international business English. She read media studies and English literature at the universities of Bochum and Glasgow and later taught in the field of British Cultural Studies. Teaching in-house at companies and at universities, she focuses on business communication and the interfaces of intercultural issues and international business.

For German publisher Cornelsen, she has written three related guide books on e-mailing, meetings and applying for a job in English. She has been working with the Diversity Icebreaker since 2010. For more info: [www.tailored-trainings.com](http://www.tailored-trainings.com)

