

Adam Bednarek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1563-4968>

Akademia Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna w Łodzi

e-mail: adam.bednarek@ahe.email

Building an effective team in multicultural and multiethnic communities

Abstract

The paper examines team building in multicultural and multiethnic work environments – particularly in NGOs – by linking classic accounts of effective teams with sociolinguistic and socio-emotional perspectives. It conceptualises workplace teams as speech communities in which members share, negotiate, and sometimes contest linguistic norms, expectations, and emotional display rules. Drawing on management and organisational studies, the text outlines key structural conditions for effective teams, including clear goals, appropriate leadership, resource allocation, and mechanisms for accountability and cooperation. These insights are then integrated with research on emotions, culture, and communication, which highlights the role of emotional attachment, trust, and creative problem-solving in sustaining team cohesion. The paper argues that effective team building in such contexts requires not only formal structures but also deliberate cultivation of shared communicative practices and affective climates that support participation, innovation, and mutual understanding across cultural and linguistic differences.

Keywords: multicultural teams, organizational communication, sociolinguistics in teamwork, emotions and trust in teams, non-governmental organizations

Introduction

In contemporary organisations, and particularly in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), team-based work has become a dominant mode of organising activity and delivering services. Multicultural and multiethnic teams are no longer a marginal phenomenon but a structural feature of many workplaces, shaped by global mobility, migration, and increasingly diverse local communities (Katzenbach, Smith, 1993; Fapohunda, 2013). While such teams can be highly innovative and responsive, they also face specific challenges related to communication, trust, emotional climate, and the negotiation of cultural

norms. These challenges are especially visible in NGOs, where cooperation, value-driven engagement, and relational work with beneficiaries are central to organisational missions. In this context, understanding how to build effective teams is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency, but a precondition for sustainable, ethically responsible, and socially impactful action. This article approaches team building in multicultural and multiethnic environments from a sociolinguistic and socio-emotional perspective. Drawing on Stubbs' (1983) classic work on speech communities and communicative behaviour, it conceptualises workplaces as communities in which members share, negotiate, and sometimes contest linguistic norms, interpretative frames, and emotional expectations.

Stubbs' classic sociolinguistic approaches to communities

Stubbs (1983) emphasizes that a linguist preparing to undertake research in a particular community cannot rely solely on abstract theory or decontextualised data. Instead, the researcher must draw on their "intuitive knowledge of the system of communicative behaviour to work out its structure" (*Ibid.*, p. 239). This intuitive knowledge is not understood as mere subjective impression, but rather as a systematically developed sensitivity to how meanings are negotiated in everyday interaction, how participants orient to one another, and how language is embedded in local practices. It allows the linguist to recognise patterns of turn-taking, politeness, and genre, and to identify the subtle cues that distinguish, for instance, casual conversation from institutional discourse. In this sense, Stubbs treats linguistic intuition as an indispensable methodological resource that complements empirical observation, enabling the researcher to formulate hypotheses about the underlying organisation of communicative behaviour in a given speech community.

However, this reliance on intuitive knowledge faces an immediate complication: different people may react differently, depending on the situation and on the specific demands of everyday behaviour. Even within a single community, interlocutors constantly shift between styles, registers, and identities, and what counts as appropriate or "normal" language use is contingent on factors such as social role, power relations, or the emotional tone of the encounter. Consequently, Stubbs reminds us that "there are no single-style speakers" (*Ibid.*, p. 221). Individual speakers command a repertoire of linguistic resources, and they select from this repertoire in highly context-sensitive ways. For the linguist, this means that intuitive knowledge must be carefully calibrated: it involves not only recognising what is said, but also understanding why a particular form is chosen in a particular interactional context, and how that choice indexes social meanings such as formality, intimacy, or distance.

Because of this complexity, miscommunication becomes a central object of inquiry rather than a mere obstacle to be avoided. When everyday interaction does not proceed smoothly, and when interlocutors misunderstand one another's intentions or emotional stances, the researcher is confronted with evidence that calls for explanation. As Stubbs

observes, a scientist who has encountered such difficulty during his or her study “may be forced to examine the reasons for and the effects of miscommunication” (*Ibid.*, pp. 240–241). Investigating these breakdowns can reveal mismatched expectations about norms of politeness, divergent interpretations of contextual cues, or conflicting assumptions about the status of different language varieties. In turn, such analysis illuminates how members of a community orient to shared conventions and where the limits of that sharedness lie. Miscommunication thus becomes a productive site for exploring the boundaries of communicative competence and the dynamics of social meaning in interaction.

Underlying these considerations is the broader question of how speech communities are conceptualised. A central concern is that members of the same speech community are presumed to share linguistic norms: they share understandings, values, and attitudes about the language varieties present in their environment, even if they do not all use them in the same way or to the same extent. While the exact definition of “speech community” is contested, there is wide agreement that the concept remains crucial for the study of language variation and change, precisely because it foregrounds shared evaluative frameworks and patterned differences. Linguists have therefore argued for conceptual categories of cognition that link meaning to socially and culturally shared practice and norms, implying that interpretation itself has a social origin. From this perspective, understanding and emotion are not purely internal states but are shaped by culturally specific ways of talking, feeling, and reacting. At the same time, recent investigations suggest that, within a cross-cultural framework, certain aspects of processing emotions remain remarkably stable (Schrauf, Sanchez, 2004). This tension between universal cognitive tendencies and culturally mediated interpretive practices underscores the importance of integrating sociolinguistic, cognitive, and anthropological insights when analysing communicative behaviour in any given community.

Building on these insights, work environments can be seen as prototypical speech communities, in which employees share, negotiate, and sometimes challenge linguistic norms, interpretative frames, and emotional expectations. If, as Stubbs argues, the linguist must rely on “intuitive knowledge of the system of communicative behaviour” to uncover its structure (Stubbs, 1983: 239), then participation in workplace interaction likewise presupposes such intuitive competence: workers must learn how to speak, when to remain silent, how explicitly to express disagreement, and how to display or withhold emotion in ways that fit local norms. The fact that “there are no single-style speakers” (*Ibid.*, p. 221) is particularly visible in organisational contexts, where individuals continuously shift style between meetings, informal conversations, and written communication, aligning their behaviour with institutional hierarchies, peer expectations, and task demands. At the same time, the possibility of miscommunication in these settings – misaligned interpretations of politeness, criticism, or emotional tone – obliges the analyst to investigate how shared norms are constituted and where they break down (*Ibid.*, pp. 240–241). In this sense, workplaces exemplify the claim that meaning and interpretation have a social origin and that, despite potential cross-cultural stability in basic emotional processing (Schrauf, Sanchez, 2004), how emotions and intentions are encoded, decoded, and evaluated are deeply shaped by the specific speech community of the organisation.

Team building

Team building is a crucial aspect in today's NGO landscape, as organizations seek to enhance productivity, profitability, and service quality through team-based structures, and it is a skill that requires both creativity and entrepreneurial ability. This approach involves viewing employees as members of interdependent teams rather than individuals. Team building activities aim to improve team performance, fostering self-development, positive communication, leadership skills, and problem-solving abilities. By uniting employees around a common goal, team building generates greater productivity. The use of team-based structures has grown since the 1980s, replacing formalized and departmentalized structures. Strong and effective teams are believed to lead to higher performance and job satisfaction. The role of a team builder is essential in leading the team towards cohesiveness and productivity. In a team-oriented environment, individuals work together to achieve overall organizational objectives. Teamwork is fostered through respect, encouragement, and care for people, rather than exploiting or dictating to them. Ultimately, great teams emerge when individuals decide to work together for a shared purpose. According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993), effective teams should have a small number of members, complementary skills, a meaningful purpose, specific goals, a clear approach to work, mutual accountability, and appropriate leadership structure (Fapohunda, 2013).

To build effective teams, one must focus on the importance of finding time, selecting team members, empowering them, providing relevant training, developing shared goals, and facilitating team functioning, especially in the early stages. Furthermore, essential dynamics for team success include team membership, team relationships, team problem-solving, team leadership, and the organizational environment. To summarize the major components of effective team building, Fapohunda (2013) suggests the following:

- **Clarity of expectations and objectives:** Teams must have specific, measurable, achievable, and relevant goals, with input from all members. Clear communication and understanding of the reasons for team creation are crucial.
- **Perspective:** Team members must understand their role within the organization and how their team's strategy aligns with the overall mission and vision.
- **Dedication:** Team members should be dedicated to the team's mission and vision, with a shared sense of enthusiasm and commitment to achieving goals.
- **Capability:** Teams should have the necessary skills and knowledge to address their assigned issues or access the required support and training.
- **Contract:** Teams should define and communicate their goals, timelines, and evaluation methods for both outcomes and processes.
- **Resources and power:** Teams need access to resources, empowerment, and authority to make decisions.
- **Cooperation:** Effective teamwork depends on team members understanding group processes, roles, and responsibilities, and effectively collaborating in problem-solving and goal-setting.
- **Communication:** Open and honest communication, including feedback, is essential for effective team building.

- **Creative improvement:** Teams should encourage creative thinking, new ideas, and reasonable risk-taking to stimulate innovation and improvements.
- **Responsibility and accountability:** Team members must feel responsible and accountable for team achievements, and recognition and rewards should be given accordingly.
- **Harmonization:** Teams should be synchronized by a central leadership team to ensure coordination and proper allocation of resources across departments.
- **Cultural change:** Organizations need to cultivate a culture that supports teamwork and collaboration, adapting systems and practices accordingly.

As presented in Adriansyah, Prastika, Muhliansyah (2023) achieving emotional attachment between team members is challenging, and the lack of strong ties can lead to a decrease in cooperation and cohesiveness within the team. This, in turn, affects the sense of comfort and security among members. The discomfort may result in a lack of trust between team members, and when trust diminishes, individuals may be less motivated to voluntarily contribute to the organization's goals and may hesitate to continue working or being part of the team. Team building training can be an effective way to improve cohesiveness and trust among team members (Riisla et al., 2021; Ganotice et al., 2022). The authors also indicate that Achieving emotional attachment between team members is challenging, and the absence of strong ties can lead to a decrease in cooperation and cohesiveness within the team. This lack of trust and discomfort may result in decreased motivation to continue working or being part of the team. Effective interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in increasing work motivation and bonding relationships between team members. On the other hand, poor internal communication can lead to disinterest in the group and may cause members to withdraw from the organization. Cohesiveness is essential for a group to achieve its goals as it fosters a sense of interest, dependence, and familiarity among members, encouraging them to work together effectively. Cohesiveness is related to various factors, such as interaction, communication, empathy, and interest, which contribute to individuals' desire to contribute to the group's goals. Building team cohesiveness through training and creating a supportive team environment is crucial for enhancing overall team effectiveness (Adriansyah, Prastika, Muhliansyah, 2023).

Furthermore, one needs to focus on the context of emotional behaviour and how that affects interaction between members of the team. Bednarek (2017) emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping meaning and interpretation within culturally shared practices and norms. A study in intercultural environments highlights that the processing of emotions remains consistent across cultures, but the manifestation of emotions is influenced by socio-cultural contexts and cognitive typologies. The interpretation of events is thus conditioned by emotions and culturally and socially shaped interpretative schemas. In relatively closed social systems with unrestricted communication among members, the overall system tends to converge over time towards greater cultural uniformity (*Ibid.*). The discussion of emotions within psychological, social, and linguistic frameworks has led to conflicting results in different disciplines. Scholars like Picard (2000), Scherer (2001), Norman (2004), and Niedenthal (2005) have contributed to this area. Some emphasize

emotions as integral to cognition and interaction with the world, while others see emotions as hindering rational perception of reality and categorize them as aesthetic or utilitarian.

Bednarek (2016) also refers to Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions, highlighting the complexity of culture and how it influences human behavior. The concept of self and one's place within a group (social categorization) plays a role in understanding interrelations within that group. Emotions also play a significant role in cultural and societal interpretation, influenced by social and cultural contexts. Proper understanding of culture involves considering affective phenomena and social schemas, making culture a multi-layered and intricate concept (Bednarek, 2016). Communication Accommodation (CA) theory, proposed by Giles and Ogay (2007), is noteworthy. It posits that individuals naturally adapt their behavior in response to changing environments to manage differences between themselves and others. This adaptation can take the form of convergence or divergence and is integrated into the communication context. CA evolved from Giles's accent mobility model and gave rise to the Speech Accommodation (SA) theory, which aims to illustrate how speakers modify their speech styles in specific social situations. Through these theories, researchers have acknowledged the significance of social identity and how interpretation is influenced by one's self-perception. This requires team members to have a complete understanding of emotional states, intercultural differences, personality traits, and the impact of proper communication.

Effective communication is essential in any team setting. To ensure a positive and constructive atmosphere, it is crucial to treat everyone with respect and politeness, fostering a sense of mutual understanding and consideration. When engaging in discussions, strive to speak with good intent, maintaining a positive tone, and avoiding any harmful or negative language. Curiosity should guide your approach to asking questions, rather than cynicism, as this encourages open dialogue and a genuine desire to understand others' perspectives. It's important to openly express disagreements when they arise, but do so in a respectful manner that promotes healthy debate and problem-solving.

Attributions should be avoided, as making assumptions about others' motivations or intentions can lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. Instead, facilitate the group process by encouraging open and honest communication without judgment. Rushing to decisions too quickly can result in overlooking valuable insights or disregarding important considerations, so take the time to thoroughly discuss and weigh different options. Respecting confidentiality is paramount in building trust within the team. Ensuring that sensitive information remains private allows team members to feel safe sharing their thoughts and concerns. Additionally, when expressing opinions or making statements, provide examples to clarify your position and help others understand your perspective more effectively. Finally, demonstrate openness and acceptance of others' viewpoints, recognizing that their feelings and perspectives are valid. Embrace the diversity of ideas within the team, as it fosters a richer and more comprehensive decision-making process. By following these guidelines, the team can establish a healthy and supportive communication environment that promotes cooperation, understanding, and collaborative success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, viewing multicultural and multiethnic work environments as speech communities foregrounds the fundamentally communicative and socio-emotional nature of team building in NGOs. Effective teams do not emerge solely from formal structures, clear procedures, or well-designed job descriptions, but from shared norms of speaking, listening, and feeling that are continuously negotiated in everyday interaction. By integrating insights from discourse analysis, organisational studies, and emotion research, the article has argued that trust, cohesion, and motivation are grounded in locally meaningful ways of framing problems, giving feedback, expressing disagreement, and managing affect. At the same time, miscommunication, conflict, and disengagement can be understood as signs of misaligned norms and expectations within the workplace speech community, rather than as individual failures alone. For practitioners, this perspective suggests that interventions aimed at strengthening teams must explicitly address communicative practices and emotional climates – through training, reflexive dialogue, and participatory design of norms – rather than focusing exclusively on structural or procedural reforms. For researchers and educators, it points to the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches that attend simultaneously to language, culture, and emotion when analysing organisational life and preparing professionals to work in increasingly diverse teams.

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Streszczenie

Budowanie efektywnego zespołu w społecznościach wielokulturowych i wieloetnicznych

Artykuł analizuje budowanie zespołów w wielokulturowych i wieloetnicznych środowiskach pracy – w szczególności w organizacjach pozarządowych – łącząc klasyczne ujęcia efektywnego funkcjonowania zespołów z perspektywą socjolingwistyczną i socio-emocjonalną. Zespoły pracownicze ujmowane są jako wspólnoty komunikacyjne, w których członkowie współdzielą, negocjują i niekiedy kwestionują normy językowe, oczekiwania oraz reguły okazywania emocji. Odwołując się do badań z zakresu zarządzania i nauk o organizacji, tekst wskazuje kluczowe warunki strukturalne efektywnego działania zespołów, takie jak jasno określone cele, odpowiedni styl przywództwa, właściwy podział zasobów oraz mechanizmy rozliczalności i współpracy (m.in. u Katzenbacha i Smitha, Fapohundy). Wnioski te zostają następnie powiązane z badaniami nad emocjami, kulturą i komunikacją, które podkreślają rolę więzi emocjonalnej, zaufania i kreatywnego rozwiązywania problemów w podtrzymywaniu spójności zespołu. Artykuł dowodzi, że skuteczne budowanie zespołów w takich kontekstach wymaga nie tylko odpowiednich struktur formalnych, lecz również świadomego kształtowania wspólnych praktyk komunikacyjnych i klimatu afektywnego sprzyjających partycypacji, innowacyjności oraz wzajemnemu zrozumieniu ponad różnicami kulturowymi i językowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: wielokulturowe zespoły, komunikacja w organizacjach, socjolingwistyka w pracy zespołowej, emocje i zaufanie w zespole, organizacje pozarządowe