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**Advantages of multicultural teams**

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
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As Dubai becomes steadily more multicultural, it is worth examining, from the London experience, the two differing reactions that may greet a new workplace colleague who has arrived from another place and another culture.

On the one hand there can be the defensive attitude, viewing the new arrival as a problem, whilst the other can be the welcoming attitude, viewing them as an opportunity to become familiar with another culture.

The defensive attitude believes that unfamiliar customs - including language, dress and food - can be in poor taste or lacking in sensitivity. Many 'cultural diversity' programmes are aimed at identifying and examining such scepticism and resentment, reducing insensitivity and instructing all staff how to avoid giving unintentional offence. The welcoming attitude appreciates the stimulating effect of new blood and new ideas that come with different perspectives.

**Added value**

By way of example: if there is an increasing trade between Dubai and (say) Sri Lanka, your team will clearly be strengthened by the inclusion of some Sri Lankan nationals and their different work philosophies and styles of problem-solving will, no doubt, enrich the managerial mix. The new team members would normally prove to be an asset as they would bring added-value to the organisation as well as contributing knowledge regarding the Sri Lankan culture - essential to increasing contact and trade.

If the UK experience is anything to go by, the defensive attitude gradually gives way to the welcoming, in most companies. But the change in attitudes can occasionally be difficult when emotion and prejudice obstruct logical debate. Cultural diversity can, all too often, bring out irrational statements that can lead to serious problems unless handled with care. Adequate training to understand and value the differences is important.

For this reason, central government may have to issue recommendations and directives, with a department dedicated to the issue of multiculturalism. All experience shows that the way to encourage positive attitude of welcoming and acceptance is to demonstrate it in action.

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The primary learning comes through repeated impressions drawn from observing communication and interpersonal contact in a multicultural context, in the handling of business - as compared to that in a mono-cultural setting. Ideally, a majority would slowly observe the corporate and commercial benefits taking shape in improved performance, and come to their own conclusions about the advantages of multicultural teams.



The alternative route, which is diversity legislation, may look like a quicker way of enforcing good habits, but it will strengthen resistance among those who are defensive. However, after seeing for themselves the success of the new-style multicultural teams, in their own organisations, they will often be among the converted!

#### Key points: Diversity

- New work colleagues of different culture are often viewed as a problem
- In time, the greater strength of multicultural teams begins to appear
- Corporate diversity policies are more effective than government directives

- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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