Cross-Cultural Leadership: Leading Teams Across India and Europe

Cross-Cultural Leadership - 15 September 2026 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

The differences are real, and worth naming

A common instinct when leading across cultures is to minimise differences, insisting that "good leadership is good leadership everywhere." There is truth in that, but it can also obscure real, practical differences that affect how teams actually communicate and work, particularly between contexts like India and much of Europe. Naming these differences directly tends to serve teams far better than pretending they do not exist.

Where friction commonly shows up

Directness and disagreement. In many European working cultures, direct disagreement in a meeting is treated as a normal, even valued, contribution. In many Indian corporate contexts, open disagreement with a senior leader in a group setting is less common, and dissent is more often expressed indirectly or in a one-to-one conversation afterward. A leader unaware of this can easily mistake silence for agreement, or read appropriate deference as a lack of initiative.

Relationship to hierarchy. Flatter European structures often expect junior team members to challenge senior decisions directly. In more hierarchical contexts, that same behaviour may be seen as inappropriate, not because people lack opinions, but because the expected channel for raising them is different. Leaders who only listen for direct challenge may miss substantial input being offered through other, more indirect channels.

Pace of decision-making. What looks like a fast decision to one team can look like a rushed one to another, and what looks like appropriate diligence to one team can look like unnecessary delay to another. Neither instinct is wrong; they simply reflect different defaults about how much consultation a decision requires before it is considered legitimate.

What tends to help

Make the implicit explicit. Rather than assuming a shared understanding of how decisions get made or how feedback is given, state it directly: "In this team, I want disagreement raised in the room, even with me" or "I will check in with each of you individually as well as in the group, because I know not everyone is equally comfortable raising concerns publicly." This single habit resolves a large share of cross-cultural friction before it starts.

Create multiple channels for input. If the only route for feedback is public challenge in a meeting, a leader will systematically miss input from team members whose cultural context favours more indirect communication. Offering written input, one-to-one conversations, and anonymous channels alongside open discussion widens the range of people who actually contribute.

Separate the message from the manner. A leader working across cultures benefits from learning to hear the substance of what is being communicated, independent of the tone or directness it arrives

in, and from adjusting their own delivery so their intended message actually lands as intended, rather than being read as either too blunt or too vague.

The underlying capability

Cross-cultural leadership is less about memorising a list of national traits, which are generalisations at best, and more about developing genuine curiosity about how each individual on the team prefers to communicate, decide, and receive feedback. Leaders who ask rather than assume tend to build stronger, more trusted teams, regardless of which specific cultures are represented.