Running Effective Multilingual Meetings

Cross-Cultural Leadership - 22 June 2026 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

An often overlooked source of unfairness

When a meeting is conducted in a language that is native for some participants and a second or third language for others, a significant, often invisible imbalance is built into the conversation from the start: native speakers can think and respond in real time with far less cognitive effort, while non-native speakers are simultaneously translating, formulating, and managing the additional demand of speaking in a non-native language, all while trying to contribute at the same pace.

How this typically shows up

Non-native speakers often participate less, not because they have less to contribute, but because the additional cognitive load of real-time translation makes it harder to jump into a fast-moving discussion. Native speakers, meanwhile, are frequently unaware this dynamic exists, and can misread quieter participation as disengagement or a lack of ideas rather than a structural language disadvantage.

Practical adjustments that help

Slow the overall pace deliberately. A moderately slower pace of speech and a slightly longer tolerance for pauses before someone responds gives non-native speakers meaningfully more room to participate, without materially lengthening the meeting.

Circulate materials in advance. Giving participants time to read and process complex material before a live discussion significantly reduces the real-time cognitive burden for non-native speakers, and often improves the quality of contribution from everyone.

Actively invite quieter participants, by name, with genuine space to answer. A direct, warm invitation, "I'd like to hear your view on this," followed by a genuine pause, tends to draw out contributions that would otherwise be lost in a faster-moving open discussion.

Avoid idioms, cultural references and humour that rely on native fluency. These are often the hardest elements of a language to follow for non-native speakers, and can leave some participants quietly lost, or unintentionally excluded, even in an otherwise accessible discussion.

Offer written follow-up in addition to live discussion. Some non-native speakers process and contribute better in writing than in live, real-time conversation. Following a live meeting with an opportunity for written input captures perspectives that the meeting itself may have missed.

Why this is a leadership responsibility, not just a courtesy

Left unaddressed, this dynamic quietly and consistently privileges native speakers' ideas in decision-making, regardless of the actual quality or relevance of those ideas relative to quieter, non-native colleagues' contributions. Leaders who design meetings deliberately around this reality build genuinely more inclusive, and usually better-informed, decisions.