

Embracing Diversity in Teams: Mastering Intercultural Collaboration

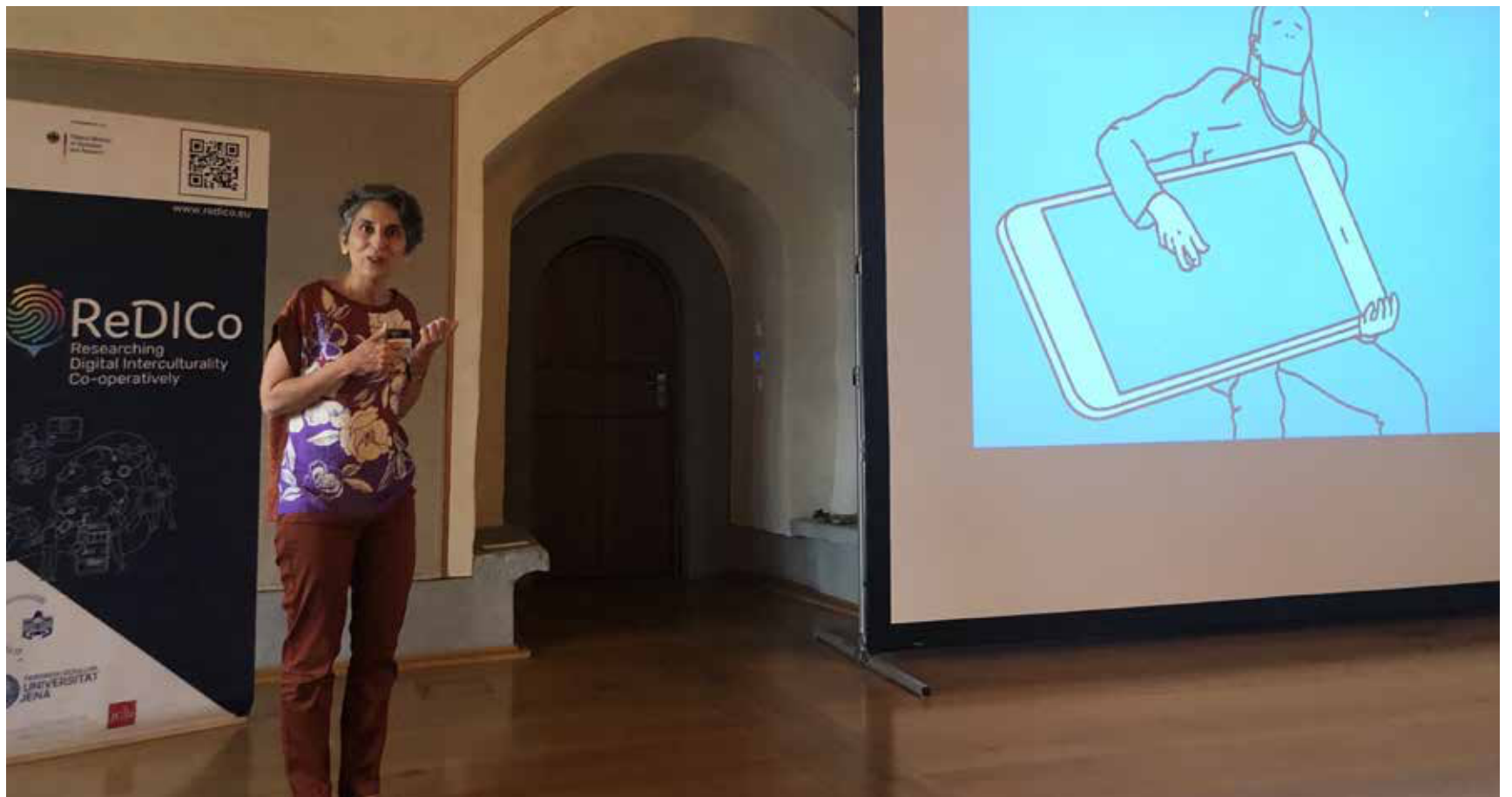
Successful cooperation in everyday working life can sometimes be a challenge – especially when people from different countries come together. But heterogeneity is also an opportunity for innovation. Using numerous examples from her everyday research, PD Dr. Luisa Conti raised awareness in her talk "Are you sure you got it right? A talk on culture and interculturality" at this year's Dornburg Seminar in March, of how much we think in categories and how we can strengthen cohesion in organizations with openness and understanding. In the interview, she talks about how to become more interculturally competent.

Dear Luisa, who are you?

I am many things. In terms of nationality, I would say I am both Italian and German. I have been living and working in Germany for 20 years. I took German citizenship because it is important to me to vote and to be an equal citizen. I have been working in the Department of Intercultural Business Communication at FSU for 17 years.

Why do you do what you do? What do you enjoy about your work?

I am involved with interculturality – and because it is so important! In our complex society, we are constantly confronted with newness. The question of how we deal with it is central. Unfortunately, fears and pigeonholing often block our way towards a



Dr. Luisa Conti speaks in Dornburg about interculturality

ence us, partly consciously and partly unconsciously. Here it is worth taking a closer look.

My motivation is to bring people together, to sensitize them to their own pigeonholing and to make them realize how important it is to treat each other with respect and openness.

It is often very useful to ask yourself: What assumptions am I currently making about my counterpart? How do these assumptions affect me? Am I behaving respectfully?

”

It sounds simple, and it is: if you support others and help make them feel comfortable, they'll perform at their best. When people feel heard and valued, they have the courage and interest to think and perform tasks reflectively.

“

synergetic cooperation – in a team or in society as a whole.

Our brain needs categories to find its way in everyday life. The challenge is to be aware of the classifications we make in the process and to question them again and again. They have an enormous influence on our perception and also our actions.

This starts with appearances: we don't care what shoe size someone wears. Other characteristics, such as skin color or gender, on the other hand, strongly influ-

If you treat others with appreciation, you will normally also receive a friendly and appreciative response.

What should I bring with me as a member of an international, intercultural team?

Openness, sensitivity, self-reflection and curiosity.

How do I create a work environment in which an international team can work well?

When people come to a new country, they often feel insecure. This situation is similar to the first time in a new job: the environment is new, there are new terms, norms and a different routine that one is not acquainted with, and there is uncertainty about whom to address formally and informally.

Supervisors and colleagues can do a lot to make the start a success. Above all, it is important to provide an open atmosphere from the very beginning and to allow mistakes. And to explain things – even if you take them for granted.

"It sounds simple, and it is: if you support others and help make them feel comfortable, they'll perform at their best. When people feel heard and valued, they have the courage and interest to think and perform tasks reflectively."

In my study "Caring and Power Sharing," I was able to demonstrate that people engage most effectively when they feel comfortable within their team.

There are three important prerequisites for this:

First, you have to feel comfortable in your role – feel competent in what you do. This also includes a certain amount of self-determination and challenge – you should feel neither under-challenged nor overwhelmed.

In the relationship with team colleagues, openness, familiarity,

mutual care and fairness play an important role. Being recognized and feeling that one's resources and own time are being invested wisely is very important.

In terms of process, I need to have an understanding of why I am doing something. There needs to be transparency, there needs to be a vision, and I need to be able to feel part of a bigger picture.

My research confirms: A friendly, community-minded environment encourages individual engagement. Recognizing our fellow human beings despite and because of their idiosyncrasies, having the courage to open up to them, and caring for and about them is an important prerequisite for developing a sustainable community and a resilient, high-performing team. Conversely, a system that tolerates exclusion contributes to self-destruction.

That actually applies to everyone, whether of the same or different nationalities, right?

Yes, definitely. Because people share an enormous amount, regardless of their nationality. Cultures don't stop at borders, after all. At the same time, however, every group, no matter how small, develops its own culture and its own normalities.

How do you get off to a good start in a team?

When an employment relationship begins or a newly assem-

bled team starts a new task, there is often a rushed dynamic: quickly get into the issues, start right away with the measures and the implementation. This can easily go wrong.

I recommend taking time to get to know each other. Simple measures often help. One method that has proven successful is for participants to bring a photo with them and talk about why it means something to the person. This breaks the ice and the participants build a more trusting relationship with each other right from the start.

It is also particularly important to transparently communicate needs in the collaboration, as well as one's own characteristics, interests and expertise that could play a role in the collaboration – right from the start. The rules of the game can be agreed in an open conversation. Only then can people be expected to enter into a genuine dialogue with each other and any conflicts that arise can also be resolved constructively.

What are dos and don'ts for daily collaboration?

Through my research, I know how helpful it is to show appreciation.

Every behavior has its backstory, shaped by individually diverse past experiences. Developing awareness and being open to others and their motivations is essential for a good collaboration.

My tip for Don't: Don't get angry before you really understand what

is behind a certain behavior.

And here's the Do: It's always worthwhile to show appreciation to others.

Thank you, Luisa, for this interview! 🌍



PD Dr. Luisa Conti studied Communication, Culture and Linguistics at the University of Udine (Italy) and completed a double doctorate in Intercultural Business Communication at the Friedrich Schiller University (FSU) Jena and at the Graduate School of Education at University of Padua in Italy. Following her habilitation at FSU, she was awarded a teaching license in the fields of Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Education at FSU. Currently, Luisa Conti is leading the German team in the EU innovation project KIDS4ALL (Key Inclusive Development Strategies for Lifelong Learning, www.kids4all.eu). She is also investigating virtual intercultural collaboration as part of the BMBF research network ReDICO (Researching Digital Interculturality Co-operatively, www.redico.eu), which she co-founded.



Youtube Channel
ReDICO