

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON TEAM EFFICIENCY

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INTRODUCTION

As global business gets more integrated, global teams have become an important part of organization. The flattening of hierarchies and project oriented forms of organizations and work process have led to an increasing use of Global Teams. Manageging these teams is a challenge. The quality of performance and service of a company has to be maintained across different global sites. A global business team is defined as a cross border team of individuals of different nationalities, working in different cultures and across different functions who come together to coordinate some aspects of international operations. These global teams are formed for:

- Global strategy development
- Research and development
- Business development
- New product launch
- Integrating organizations in mergers and acquisitions

Traditional teams work in a single context, while global teams work across multiple contexts. These leads to several differences like physical location, time zones, languages and type of communication media.

Challenges

Team work is always challenging. All teams face issues such as

- Lack of trust among members
- Lack of clarity of team objectives
- Free riding
- Lack of incentives for cooperation

In global teams, these problems are compounded by the multiple context and cultures the different team members come from. Team members are located all over the world and in many instances, attend meetings via tele/video conferences at all times of the day or night. Groups struggle to become high performing teams in situations where many of the members have never met, work at odd hours, and use impersonal technology as the sole means of communication. The dramatic growth in global teams can become a time of great creative

potential. In The Medici Effect, Frans Johansson refers to the time of great creativity in 15th century Italy, during the reign of the Medicis. He describes the Medici Effect as, "...a time and place when different cultures, domains and disciplines stream together towards a single point...[which allows] for establishing concepts to clash and combine, ultimately forming a multitude of new, groundbreaking ideas."

However, cultural differences, which are not obvious, also bring with them a potential downside, when team members and leaders fail to appreciate the importance that culture can have on member behavior. As one of the authors said in an earlier article, "Working in a multicultural environment is a distinctly challenging task. Be it leading a team, talking with a co-worker from another country, negotiating with a vendor, or meeting with the representative of a regulatory agency, cultural and language divergences intrude.

Team leaders need to be cognizant of how to mitigate the negative impact language and culture might have on meetings, decision making, handling of conflict, dealing with time zone differences and language differences.

Meetings

Besides the more obvious issues about who sits where, especially important in hierarchical countries, other nuances impact team effectiveness. In some Asian cultures, meetings are seen as ceremonies/ceremonial. They are NOT where decisions are made or problems are discussed. All that happens BEFORE the meeting and the meeting itself is the time for the announcement of the decision.

Decision Making

Whether decisions are made at the top, with or without robust conversation and input, or are made by consensus (everyone must agree before the decision is to be made) – all are underpinned by various cultural preferences. For those with a Hierarchical Orientation – decisions need to be made at the top. In some cultures, there is little or no discussion or involvement of team members in the decision making. For those with a more Participative Orientation, this feels demeaning, as if their opinion is worthless. If a team leader involves team members in conversation when it is their expectation that an effective team leader makes decisions without input from the team, the team members may view the leader as ineffective and unable to make decisions. In some cultures, issues are discussed behind the scenes (not in meetings) and people are involved, invited to have their say (sometimes in social settings such as drinks after work, rather than at work, for example in Japan). Team leaders who misinterpret these options for culturally appropriate approaches or ignore them, may do so at their project's peril.

Conflict

When things do not go well, team interactions break down very fast on virtual and global teams. Repair of the damage also is particularly difficult at a distance. Leaders need to be particularly sensitive to cultural attitudes about conflict (which differ greatly) in order to avoid having misunderstandings blow out of proportion. Some cultures believe in maintaining harmony or not raising critical issues for consideration because others on the team (or the team leader) disagree(s). Some cultures prefer "heated interactions" and the intellectual challenge of robust discussions. This approach may make team members from group cultures, who value harmony, very uncomfortable.

Time Zone Differences

Most global teams are also virtual. The more widely dispersed the team members, the greater the potential for stresses on the team. Too often people are working virtually (which in relationship cultures is more difficult than face-to-face) when they are most tired (during the evening or late night hours), in a second language. It is precisely this time when they are at their least Effective as thinkers and communicators. An unintended consequence to these late night meetings for those not at headquarters, is the feeling that those required to be available for meetings at odd hours are somehow less valued members of the team (which could lead to morale issues). Effective global teams stagger the start time of team meetings so that all members are equally “put out” over the course of the project. This often minimizes the unintended consequences and recognizes those working in second languages need to be at their freshest when they are working on difficult challenges.

Language differences

Anyone who has studied a language other than their “mother tongue” will tell you that it is especially difficult and tiring to work in a “second language.” Native speakers often know many more definitions for each word than second language speakers, which means nuances are lost. In critical situations, such as scientific research, clinical trials, and regulatory compliance, these nuances are even more important. In addition, people consistently report that they are far more creative and think much faster in their primary language. The issue of language is of particular importance to pharmaceutical teams as English is the language of this industry; however, not everyone is sufficiently fluent in English. To make sure they are easily understood, sensitive team members avoid the use of acronyms and sports analogies which are hard to understand (cultural context) or just do not translate well. Because one can speak a second language does not mean they are equally facile in writing or reading it (or they may be better at reading or writing than speaking). One global team success strategy is to make sure everyone has equal access to information in the mode in which they feel most accomplished. This means using agendas and sending them in advance of the meeting, carefully communicating at the meeting and following-up with written summaries of action items and decisions made. Another success strategy is for team leaders to allow those in natural language groups to converse in their mother tongue after the meeting to allow them to discuss and come to agreement on their understanding. If team leaders stay during this check/re-check conversation, they are available to answer questions or offer clarification needed. While language and time zone differences are obvious stressors for those on global teams, the impact of culture values is both more important to understand and less obvious to identify as a team pressure. Just because people do things or view things differently (whether this is based on culture or personality) does not mean they are wrong. Different perspectives can significantly enhance creative thinking and problem solving. Try to think, “It is not wrong; it is just different.” The steps to build cultural sensitivity are to first, recognize that cultural differences are real; second, respect that others are different and will not change just because it is convenient for you if they do; and lastly find ways to reconcile the differences. Hofstede calls this reconciliation of differences – the establishment of practices. Use practices or protocols that take into account the needs of the various cultural orientations on the teams.

CONCLUSION

A team needs a very clear sense of purpose. The mission and objectives should be defined in such a way that it is accepted and owned by all team members. There should be a clear structuring of task, and allocation of roles and responsibilities. Building relationships is crucial to team success. Leading and managing a team under any conditions can be difficult. Add the unique dimension of culture and language and the leadership responsibility becomes far more complicated. To be done well, it requires a great deal of sensitivity and awareness, not only by the leader but by all of the team members to the issues faced by co-workers from other countries and cultures who may not speak English as a first language. If the human process interactions on teams are not going well, this is a leading indicator that the team is not likely to meet its goals (on time or on budget). Also, the speed with which products get to market may be a direct function of how well the issues of cultural and language differences are addressed. Selection of team members have to be done carefully. Members who have worked together before or have the experience of being a part of global team before should be given preference. The team leader should be technically, interpersonally and professionally competent and should have skills and experience in managing diversity. The team leader and members need to identify the creative differences and disruptive differences. Creative differences bring strength, flexibility, and speed while disruptive differences can create mistrust and conflict. In order to improve performance, global teams need to have the quality of reflexivity. Reflexivity happens when the team reflects on its errors, analysis its success, think about whether the group composition was adequate to meet objectives, and assesses the use of time and resources.

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