

Creating Effective Global Teams

by
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The world is getting smaller--not literally, but from a communication standpoint. People can communicate across continents in seconds with the click of a computer mouse. As the number of cross-border mergers and alliances increase, global teams composed of people from different cultures and countries will routinely work together. This trend will continue as it becomes essential to have an international presence in the marketplace.

Teams in general will see projects through from conception to completion and will have product or project accountability. As these teams form, complete their project and dissipate, the ability to quickly recruit and develop functional teams will become essential.

Obstacles

Creating effective teams can be a challenge when all members are from the same country. Multi-national teams present even more challenges.

One of the most obvious obstacles is language. Even a team of English-speaking Americans, English, and Australians can have dialect and cultural barriers. Minor misunderstanding of a word's meaning, can create conflict. But when team members speak Swedish, English, and Chinese, the conflicts and difficulties are compounded.

If that isn't enough, there are the physical barriers of distance and a variety of time zones. These teams may rarely meet physically. Global teams that communicate primarily by teleconferencing, e-mail, and the Internet--Cyberspace teams--will become commonplace.

Because of such obstacles, global teams can take much longer to become as productive as single-culture teams. To deal with these challenges, the Human Performance Technologist's approach involves a wide variety of methods. The obstacles to teamwork are related to a variety of factors--and often a combination of several factors which may or may not include the people involved and their personalities. By looking at the team in the larger context of its environment, you can plan the right type of intervention(s) that will bring about lasting results.

A Diagnostic Tool

Diagnosing the needs of a team and prescribing the right interventions is more complicated than it may seem. Although there are some similarities or patterns that can help with diagnosis, every team has different needs depending on the challenges they face, their length of time in existence, and the team members' past experiences with each other.

One tool that can be very helpful in diagnosing a team's needs is "A Model for Effective Global Team Performance." This model has been adapted from The Behavioral Engineering Model in *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance* by Thomas F. Gilbert (page 88). According to Gilbert, "We can say that all instrumental human behavior--all behavioral components of performance--have two aspects of equal importance: a person with a repertory of behavior and a supporting environment. The person's repertory and the supporting environment together form a transaction that we call behavior."

Gilbert then divided each of these two major determinants of behavior into three sub-categories. Environmental support was broken down into information, resources, and incentives/consequences. Knowledge and skills, capacity, and internal motivation comprised the individual behavior repertory. The categories are all interrelated but the sub-components help us narrow our focus in order to determine where we can get the greatest leverage in improving performance.

Gilbert's model is based on individual performance, but it applies equally well to team performance. The elements of The Model for Effective Global Teams are illustrated in Table I. The main purpose of the model is that a team will be successful only if it has an environment that will support it. And while the individual members of the team affect its success, the major impact on overall team performance comes from the environment. In other words, an exemplary team put into an environment that is not supportive will lose its effectiveness.

Problems are usually found in Cell 1 (Information)

Cultural Differences

Certain team diseases are more common than others. The model emphasizes that most of the problem areas are found in cell number one (Information). Initial analysis in this area usually uncovers deficiencies in understanding organizational or team goals, unclear roles, and communication issues that frequently need to be addressed.

For international teams it is even more important to emphasize the basics such as establishing goals, clarifying roles, and simply getting to know each other in order to overcome cultural differences. For starters, different team members, especially from different countries, have different concepts of "team" according to Bobbi Tower, a management consultant in suburban Philadelphia who has facilitated numerous multi-national teams. An American culture of competitiveness and individualism has a different concept of team compared to their Japanese counterpart who is more group-oriented. Some cultures do not value consensus or have a different standard for when it is achieved.

The group process of meetings is also very different in various cultures. For example, one global team member noted that the French prefer to dialogue and intellectualize. They prefer to use the meetings as an opportunity to discuss things and then make decisions outside of the meeting whereas the Americans considered the meeting a forum for decision making. Coming from a fast-paced, bottom line-oriented American mind-set, she found it hard to keep the French focused. They do not particularly place value on agendas and did not like using tools such as a flipchart to record progress and/or decisions.

Cultural differences appear in almost every facet of doing business. Many American companies do not allow smoking on the premises while smoking is commonplace in most European companies. Many American companies' employees are subject to drug and alcohol testing while at an Italian company wine may be served in the company dining room. American team members may try to schedule meetings or deadlines in July while most Europeans are on holiday. The concept of time itself and the value placed on incentives will also vary widely.

As time progresses, these cultural differences can become more and more of an obstacle. It is because of cultural differences such as these that everyone interviewed for this article emphasized the greater importance of team members getting the opportunity to meet face to face, especially when a team is first forming. The importance of socializing to get to know each other personally and to begin to understand their different perspectives on things cannot be overemphasized. Otherwise, combined with personality differences, the cultural differences can be debilitating to the team process.

Consequently, global team members must have the opportunity to get together. These meetings must be used judiciously because of the major expenditures in time and travel. However, face-to-face meetings are necessary and should be scheduled early in the formation of the team, and at critical decision points thereafter.

Shared Goals/Clear Roles

One way to use meeting time effectively is to help the team to develop shared goals. Many teams get engulfed in conflict--sometimes severe-- because team members are trying to accomplish something different. Without clearly defined objectives, a consensus on the team's mission, and prioritized efforts the individual team members may be diligently working on their tasks but effectively pulling the team in different directions. The guidance provided by a

mission statement and organizational goals is essential for the team to establish goals that complement the overall organizational priorities. Based on these goals, the team may then establish priorities for its own project(s).

Once a team has defined its goals and priorities, the roles of the individual team members must be determined. Without this critical step, conflict is inevitable. Team members may duplicate efforts while other tasks are left undone. As such conflicts escalate, everyone starts blaming each other and the team becomes dysfunctional.

A second aspect of role definition is for the team to clearly understand its boundaries of authority and responsibility. Many companies implement workforce empowerment by telling everyone to go ahead and make decisions. As a consequence employees may be reluctant to make decisions because they do not have a clear distinction between what they have the authority to decide, and what must be cleared through management. It is ironic that boundaries actually increase freedom, but without this information most teams get stuck in indecision and inaction.

Communication

Communications issues always pose a challenge, but even more so with global teams. Team members must freely pass information along to each other but in order to do this they must discuss who needs to communicate what to whom and why.

They must also discuss *how* and *when* they will communicate. With different locations, languages, and time zones as obstacles, the team must learn how to use technology to its best advantage. In addition, the team must maintain lines of communication with other teams, customers, suppliers, and management. Performance criteria must be clearly defined and communicated and feedback must be provided to the team and its individual members on their performance.

Global teams must develop processes that are linked and sequenced among the various locations. They must then make the process obvious by preparing flow charts and process maps that make the process very clear and define how the team's work will progress over time.

Ground Rules

Establishing ground rules for how to interact and operate as a team is especially important for international teams. How will they handle it if one team member is always late for meetings? What if a team member betrays confidences or is disrespectful of fellow team members? When the team conducts a meeting by teleconference, what procedures will they use? This setting could create unique problems if members do not identify themselves when they speak.

These issues should be discussed early in the process to establish clear expectations of what is acceptable, and what is not, and the consequences of not complying. For international teams this is especially important. Because each individual may represent a different culture as well as an individual personality, each team must develop its own culture through establishing ground rules. This should be a blend of the various perspectives and ways of doing things to help avoid the "your way versus my way conflict."

Cell 2 (Resources)

If all the components of Cell 1 (Information) are provided, team members are more likely to have cohesive relationships and to work together effectively. However, a lack of resources (Cell 2) can greatly impact the team's productivity. If a team doesn't have the resources it needs to accomplish a goal--whether it's time, equipment, people, or money--it will have difficulty succeeding.

Cross-cultural Interpreter

In combating the cultural challenges, one resource that can help smooth the way is to have the assistance of an

organizational development specialist (internal or external) who can assess and help manage cultural compatibility issues. A cross-cultural interpreter who has had experience and contacts in the countries involved can be a great asset in facilitating communication and planning.

In a large organization the cross-cultural interpreter may be one of the team member's who has had the exposure to all cultures involved. This member must have the flexibility to fulfill the dual role of interpreter and regular team member. It should be cautioned that such a dual role may be transformed into a team leader role, whether intended or not. This transformation may be even tougher to avoid since an individual with such experience tends to be senior, and may have his own expectations of leadership.

Equipment

International teams need equipment for communication. This includes the basics of phones and fax, but also requires e-mail and videoconferencing capabilities. Since the teams cannot meet face-to-face regularly, videoconferencing becomes essential.

Hoffmann-La Roche, Inc. has the latest in technology to meet this need. They have a Global Team Room or GTR. It is a dedicated videoconference room equipped with a computer and a large-screen TV that allows team members to hear and see their counterparts in Palo Alto, California; Nutley, New Jersey; Japan; and Switzerland in almost life size. It also allows them to review documents on screen--a feature that is particularly important for teams involved in technical work such as in the pharmaceutical industry. The room is equipped with phones, a fax machine, computers and printers, and technical support.

Because personal contact is stressed by everyone associated with global teams, this type of equipment can go a long way toward improving interpersonal relations and allowing the team to overcome cultural obstacles. Because the individuals on global teams represent such diverse backgrounds, it is crucial for all team members to be involved as much as possible. This type of technology makes involvement and semi-personal contact realistic without extensive travel and associated expense.

Leadership

Another resource that is even more critical to global teams is effective leadership. Not everyone understands the importance of the social aspects of team dynamics. It takes a special leader that understands these needs and can also garner the respect from people with varying technical backgrounds and cultures according to Howard Scheiber of Hoffmann-LaRoche in Nutley, New Jersey. They must put as much effort into managing the cultural aspects of team interaction as they do in managing the strategic or financial aspects of the project.

The leader must be able and willing to coordinate communication using a wide variety of methods and to develop a plan for what needs to be communicated, who is responsible, and by what method. With the obstacles of geography and time differential as well as potential technical complications, this can be a monumental task. It is one that must be accomplished if the team is to reach maximum productivity.

Work Procedures

Teams need work procedures that prevent duplication of effort and conflicts over how things should get done. If everyone is doing things his own way, there will inevitably be confusion and conflicts. This is further complicated by the need for technical teams to meet the regulatory and procedural requirements of many countries. In such cases not having clear procedures can lead to serious legal and financial problems.

Cell 3 (Incentives and Consequences)

Compensation

Many organizations are going to "the team concept" without considering the impact of their compensation and reward system. These systems are most often based on individual performance, not teamwork. If a team member's salary increase or bonus is based on individual performance, what incentive is there to help other team members? It may even be detrimental to an individual's personal compensation to help others. Such a system encourages competition instead of teamwork.

In global teams incentives and consequences become even more complicated. Different cultures value such incentives as money, respect, approval, gaining new knowledge, or gaining access to new markets in much different ways. For example, in Japan a bonus based completely on team performance would be very acceptable, but probably not in the United States where there is more emphasis on individual performance and rewards. In the initial stages of globalization, companies often decentralized their bonus structures and based them on the needs of the individual countries, but cross-cultural teams complicate things further. Developing an incentive or compensation plan that meets the needs of all is a challenging task.

This complication extends to the very top management arranging the alliance. In making a deal with a third-world country, Americans are generally more interested overall in gaining access to the market and the profitability of the venture, while their counterparts from the third world may place a higher value on the opportunity to learn new manufacturing or marketing techniques and access to new technology.

Freedom from Fear

Fear can be a major de-motivator. Consequently, the impact of taking risks and sometimes failing can have a significant effect on team performance. Are teams and individuals penalized for trying something new? If so, creativity and innovation are squashed. The reactions of managers and supervisors to creative ideas and novel approaches are either a positive or negative consequence for the desired behavior of creative problem solving.

International teams that include people who have or are now living under totalitarian regimes will have a history and culture of fear of speaking openly. This can be another major obstacle to team performance.

Cell 4 (Knowledge/Skills)

The list of training required is much longer for global teams. It includes cultural and language training and communication skills (even body language can have entirely new meaning in different cultures. Teams also need training on how to use all the technology from e-mail to teleconferencing.

For global teams emphasis on the basics is critical. The team must learn more about team dynamics and have assistance in developing ground rules, teams goals, clarifying roles, and setting up methods for communication. They must learn techniques such as brainstorming and achieving consensus, and meeting management.

In addition, teams may need training in a variety of skills from problem solving and change management to technical skills for the job.

For the best results, training should be *just in time*. Giving the team a week-long training program on teamwork, usually doesn't work best. It is much more effective if it is given in small increments as the team needs the specific training. For example, if the team is interviewing for a new member, provide training on interviewing skills and the legal issues in hiring just before they do their first interviews. Provide training in conflict management at the first signs of major conflict.

Training can provide a tremendous boost to the effectiveness of teams, but it must be used in conjunction with interventions related to the systemic support and structure of the organization in which the teams must perform.

Cells 5 and 6 (Capacity and Motivation)

Based on my experience with teams, a large majority of problems are related to the environment, the top half of the model. While there are individuals who are independent workers or who may not have the capacity or motivation for team work, these problems are more easily avoided through proper team selection. Qualities such as open-mindedness, willingness to change, and personal initiative should be sought.

While training in such areas as cultural differences, communication skills, and team skills can certainly help and is highly recommended for all teams, training will not always be successful in changing an individual who is not sensitive to the values of others. It is much more effective and efficient to start with team players rather than trying to coerce an independent personality to become a team player. If new team members are being recruited, look for these qualities as well as technical expertise.

Finally, watch for any de-motivators in the organization. Erratic and unplanned change, a sense of inequity, lack of recognition or celebration of accomplishments are examples of de-motivators. An incentive and reward system that fosters collaboration can go a long way to overcoming these potential problems.

Conclusion

To analyze the effectiveness of teams and determine the causes of team inefficiency or conflict, use the Model for Effective Global Team Performance to isolate the areas of greatest leverage. In almost all cases, the problem areas will show up in the environmental support system--Cells One through Three.

Performance technologists use many techniques and interventions. They recognize that it is often a combination of several strategies that will bring about the desired results. They approach the situation from all angles to assure that team members have the information and resources they need and that potential sources of conflict are minimized. And most important of all, they work to make sure the team has an environment and structure in which it can succeed.

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A Model for Effective Global Team Performance

ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT		
<p>Cell 1. Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ! Mission statement ! Shared goals ! Clearly defined roles and expectations ! Knowledge of team members through socialization ! Sharing of experiences ! Knowledge of how to communicate effectively with other team members ! Performance criteria clearly defined and communicated ! Performance feedback ! Ground rules for team conduct ! Defined boundaries of authority and responsibility ! Established work procedures ! Efficient processes or the authority to make them efficient 	<p>Cell 2. Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ! Cross-Cultural interpreter ! Equipment--computers, tools, supplies needed to do the job efficiently including e-mail and videoconferencing capabilities ! Effective leaders and facilitators ! Access to leaders ! Adequate budget for training and travel ! Freedom of decision making ! Methods for measuring progress & success ! People resources to do the job ! Time: to get to know each other and to do the job ! Job aids 	<p>Cell 3. Incentives/Consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ! Freedom from fear ! Permission to learn by success and failure ! Fair compensation based on team performance and individual success ! Respect from peers and management ! An organizational culture that reinforces team decision making & continuous improvement ! Performance measurement based on desired outcomes ! Challenge/responsibility ! Good performance is recognized/rewarded ! Team celebrations and recognition ! Career development opportunity
INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR		
<p>Cell 4. Knowledge/Skills</p> <p>Training in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ! Cultural differences (Etiquette, dress, values) ! Language ! Team skills and techniques such as brainstorming, achieving consensus ! Communication skills ! Management skills ! Problem solving skills ! Technical skills ! Team leader skills ! Meeting management ! Cross training ! Change management 	<p>Cell 5. Capacity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ! Team player vs independent worker ! Ability to learn technical skills ! Personal initiative ! Ability to work with people ! Individual and team capacity for self evaluation ! Willingness to change behavior to support team (May be hampered by past experiences that did not work out)) ! Ability to be open-minded about cultural differences ! Freedom to speak out 	<p>Cell 6. Motivation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ! Desire for challenge ! Personal goals complement company goals ! Desire to learn through failure and success ! Removal of de-motivating factors

Adapted from Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance by Thomas F. Gilbert.

About the Author

Biography of Diane C. Hanson

Diane Hanson, President of Creative Resource Development, has over 25 years of experience in management, consulting, and training. She has been a top ranked sales manager with Ayerst Laboratories (Now Wyeth-Ayerst). Her prior experience as a manager has been invaluable in her work as a consultant in helping organizations achieve their goals.

She is a recognized authority on teams, teamwork, and organizational change having published several articles in *Business Philadelphia*, *The Quality Observer*, and *Performance Improvement*. She also is a writer and serves on the Editorial Board of Today's Team, a national publication for team members, facilitators, and team coaches.

After receiving her BS degree from Cornell University, Ms. Hanson graduated with distinction from the University of Pennsylvania with her MS in Organizational Dynamics. She is listed in Who's Who in Finance and Industry.

She has been a guest lecturer at the graduate schools of the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, Penn State Great Valley, and Temple University's Executive MBA Program.

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