



Managing a Global Team



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Managers tell us how challenging it is. They work with team members in many countries. Those team members speak different languages, communicate differently, make decisions differently in addition to being up and working in entirely different time zones. It's remarkably easy for communication to break down, sometimes when we are not even aware of the breakdown. As managers, we assume that everyone understands and is working toward the same goals and schedules until we discover otherwise.

Many of us started our careers working in the same office or the same building as our co-workers. We knew everyone we worked with because the teams were co-located. If we worked in a corporate division on a particular product, we were all primarily in the same location. We benefited from a common culture and a common point of view. In most cases, it didn't take too much effort to get an idea across.

If you were a technical communicator working with a software or hardware development team, you could pop into a developer's office to ask a question. You could get a copy of the latest iteration of the product and work alongside of the developers to try it out. You could ask for a demonstration and listen carefully as the developer explained how things worked. Sometimes we didn't even have to talk to get "the idea."

As our organizations expand around the world, those old expectations begin to break down. We can't read someone's body language when we rarely or never see them. When our cultures are different, we may even misinterpret some visible signals. When we all try to interact in English, as is frequently the case, those who are not native speakers may miss the subtleties of the discussion or be unable to communicate what they really intend. When our writers work with developers for whom English is a second language, key information needed for customers may be lost.

We try all sorts of tricks to ensure that our message is clear and accurately received. We follow up verbal meetings with extensive notes. We emphasize the key messages both orally and in writing. It all helps, but it certainly means that communicating takes a lot more time than it once did.

COLLABORATING ACROSS CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IS HARD

Developing a collaborative team environment is fraught with barriers but when the team members are dispersed internationally, the barriers may quickly become even more difficult to overcome. Team members may split into different camps because the trust that comes with frequent contact is missing. Groups that are collaborative and inclusive in one location may discover that their collaborative style doesn't work well in another culture. Some cultures, for example, find it very difficult to admit mistakes. They aren't comfortable with a team style that encourages the risks that might come from freely tossing out new ideas.

Some cultures encourage speaking out and asking questions; others believe that asking questions of people one doesn't know well is rude. Such a mismatch may create a divide between global team members that was never intended and may be difficult to overcome without a better understanding of cultural differences.

When a company changes its culture to accommodate an international workforce, it may have detrimental affects. Look at the stories we have heard recently about the culture at Amazon.com. Does this aggressive culture work around the world? If it takes such an aggressive culture for Amazon to succeed in the US, will changing the company culture in countries where such aggression is viewed as extremely negative threaten Amazon's success?

We hear about companies that have opened offices in China, for example, only to have employees leave to join Chinese companies as soon as comparable technology is developed locally. Could this move be a result of incompatible cultures? Do people prefer to work with people who have similar backgrounds and worldviews as they do?

What if you hire someone locally who fits your company culture but is consequently viewed negatively by clients or your management in that country? Does that hurt your team overall?

FACILITATING AN INTERNATIONAL CULTURE

As a manager, how do you handle the potential pitfalls of working with a cross-cultural global team? The first step is to understand how the local cultures of your team members differ from your own local culture. Consider the ways that people make decisions

or their notions about timeliness. Remember that it's not just one characteristic that might make team members behave differently but a collection of characteristics.

Be certain that you keep an open mind about different ways that your team members may need to work. Do they appreciate polite feedback that emphasizes their strengths, or do they expect to be told directly and aggressively what they are doing wrong?

In any event, you will find it most important to be certain that you listen to everyone's point of view and actively collect feedback. Give everyone a chance to be heard, even if the talking is through phone or video conferences. Remember that in some cultures, people need time to prepare how they will respond to an issue or question, so notify them in advance about what you want to discuss.

Be sure to tell your native English speakers to slow down. Talking too fast makes it difficult for others who are straining to understand. Be sure to invite those from cultures more reluctant to speak to take their turns.

I often suggest to managers that they establish written procedures that clearly outline process steps and define expectations of timeliness and quality. When everyone is part of the same culture, written procedures may seem unnecessary. But when people may interpret verbal instructions differently, having things written down may decrease misunderstandings.

Consider providing training in the basics of your own culture. If you want people to speak up and express disagreement but you have team members who are culturally reluctant to do so, you might set up training in helping them express differences of opinion.

You don't necessarily want to change an important ingredient in your company or your organizational culture. But that will mean helping those who have different norms to understand exactly what you expect.

HELPING THE CULTURES MATCH

I once worked with an organization that had added a large information-development team in India. Everyone on the Indian part of the team was young, generally in their 20s and 30s. Everyone on the US team was middle aged or older, in their 50s and 60s. The Indian team included writers with strong technical educations. The US team members were primarily humanities majors with many years of experience in editing and publishing.

It was crucial that these team members got to know one another personally. What helped was having some members of each team spend several months at the other location.

Another team that was successful hired a US manager with the same cultural background as the remote team. Having a manager who understood the culture of the remote team was remarkably helpful in bridging potential disconnects.

Clearly it takes considerable preparation, hard work, and patience to manage an international team effectively. Understanding the cultural pitfalls from the very first and working hard to overcome them is critical to success.

CIDM has been focusing in 2015 on the benefits and the challenges of collaboration across organizational silos. The same barriers to be recognized and the techniques to overcome those barriers will help managers navigate the need for collaboration across organizational cultures. Identifying problems like "not-invented here," "hoarding," or finding needed information or expertise are also common cross-cultural problems. The need for simple and effective goals, team members who will try hard to understand different ways of working, and extensive networks across the world should reap the same successes that they do with collaboration across organizational silos. Breaking down the barriers is important to a global team's success. 

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