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Spinning Your Wheels?

Successful Global Teams Know How To Gain Traction

The most productive global teams forthrightly tackle the inherent problems of distance.

I f you've ever tried to drive out of a snowdrift, you know that whirling wheels create an even more slippery surface. Gunning your motor looks energetic and decisive but is more likely to generate frustration than forward movement.

A better way is to dig out a path for your tires and spread sand, preparing the conditions for success: traction for your wheels.

So it is with global teams. Those who plunge right into work look efficient at first but eventually spin their wheels. Those who succeed are guided by people who recognize the magnitude of the global team challenge and who patiently prepare six conditions for success:

1. Face-to-face relationships.
2. Informed, skillful leadership.
3. A communications "heartbeat."
4. Intelligent use of e-mail links.
5. A cross-cultural "Third Way."
6. Time, money and managerial support.

Face-to-face relationships

The most productive global teams are those whose members enjoy working with one another so much that they want to do it again!

This finding from a recent study by Dianne Hofner Saphiere, published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, resonates with the messages from other researchers who are seeking the conditions for success. All highlight the importance of trust, the glue of the virtual workplace. All say that, when it comes to making trust possible, face-to-face relationships have no equal, not even electronic communications systems with every bell and whistle. By face-to-face, we don't mean videoconferencing. If you can't shake hands, you're not face-to-face.

We're learning that informal, spontaneous talk adds value. It not only builds

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and maintains trust (which motivates people to work collaboratively), but it also absorbs the shocks of conflicts and misunderstandings, and creates opportunities for mentoring, modeling and monitoring. These advantages of close proximity decline rapidly as distance increases, according to researchers David Armstrong and Paul Cole. The distances they're referring to are measured in meters, like people at opposite ends of a hallway. What happens when colleagues are separated by distances measured in time zones?

"Face-to-face relationships" is numbered "1" on our list because we believe it's the sine qua non of success. Every get-together of a global team, beginning with its first, needs both structured work periods and free time for schmoozing and fun. (We suggest a three-day minimum every time members come together.) By the way, Hofner Saphiere discovered that during formal meetings, productive teams discussed relationship issues and emotions much more than unproductive ones. Productive teams were both task oriented and relationship oriented. Unproductive teams were merely task oriented.

Here's a way of keeping face-to-face relationships firmly in members' minds during time apart: Create for every member an identical wall map of the world with each person's photo and bio attached at the appropriate location.

Informed, skillful leadership

According to leaders of successful global teams, their responsibilities require many more hours of work than they've ever devoted to co-located teams.

Why? First, there are the complicated logistics. Then there's the greater need for thorough, timely documentation of everything, supported by graphs, charts and other visuals to aid communication across language and culture barriers. Perhaps most significant, there are the hours devoted to becoming personally acquainted with the team's members, to learning about their national and organizational cultures, and to dealing proactively with their diverse and sometimes clashing expectations regarding accountability, conflict, authority, decision making, feedback, deadlines and more.

The leader's informed skillfulness is rarely more critical than during the first weeks of the team's formation. Before the first meeting, the leader must hammer out the team's purpose with its executive sponsors, then gauge the members' aggregate strengths and weaknesses (information to be shared with team members so that ways of compensating for weaknesses can be devised). Worthwhile, too, is trying to persuade each member's local manager to include performance on the global team in determining that member's evaluation.

The team's first meeting paves the way for long-term success. One leader we respect held this meeting at a site unfamiliar to all (including himself) and focused it on discovering commonalities among the members, not on dissecting their differences. With customer service as the topic of discussion, all members had equal time to share insights they had gained working back home; all identified ideas that were cross-nationally transferrable. The leader was careful to model respect for each team member and his or her culture by, for example, listening carefully, asking clarifying questions and neither interrupting nor permitting interruptions. Finally, he ensured that there was free time for all simply to have fun together.

A communications 'heartbeat'

Your heartbeat is predictable, routine. When it is no longer so, you're history.

The same is true for global team communications. Successful teams establish a disciplined schedule of meetings, such as quarterly face-to-face meetings and phone (or video) conferences every second Friday.

As discussed in the next point, extensive use of e-mail, facsimile and groupware certainly is necessary. But these can never substitute for the "traction" gained from regular face-to-face and phone conferences involving the entire team.

Intelligent use of e-mail links

If you're a frequent user of e-mail, you'll be able to list a few of its curses together with its undeniable blessings. Here's what researchers are discovering about e-mail within the United States.

In comparison with their face-to-face and phone communications, Americans using E-mail tend to be less polite, presumably because they have low awareness of the other's social presence. Result: faster escalation of conflicts, which we easily recognize as detrimental to team success. Also, e-mail users are less aware of each other's prestige and experience, presumably because these don't show up on screen. Result: E-mail conversations and debates are more inclusive, less inhibited by age and rank. That's good, right?

Not so fast. We're talking about geographically dispersed, multicultural teams here. Outside the United States, people are not as enamored of inclusiveness as we are; they give far more respect to status and hierarchy. Believe it or not, our egalitarian tendencies can perplex and offend them.

Americans have complained to us that team members abroad, such as the Japanese, are slow to respond to e-mails and faxes. This complaint provides an example of how e-mail, which reflects Americans' need for speed, col-

lides with features of Japanese culture. Leaving aside that the Japanese are using a second language, let's note first that their language does not include the concept of "spontaneous." Japanese are correct and proper, expecting to carefully craft their responses.

Second, Japanese recipients may need to develop consensus within their group before replying. Finally, for the Japanese, a written message devoid of nonverbal, social and other contextual information is an incomplete message. Americans like the "efficiency" of targeted, spare prose, but for the Japanese and others it's often not enough to compel action.

Videoconferencing falls short, too. One of our American interviewees, while in Taiwan, participated in a videoconference between local team members and Americans back in the United States. When a U.S.-based member noisily pounded the desk while arguing a point, the American in Taiwan sensed an abrupt change in the locals' demeanor that signaled that they had taken offense. This was not noticed by the Americans in the United States. Fortunately, the Taiwan-based American was able over the next several days to act as a culture broker, soothing the locals' consternation.

A cross-cultural 'Third Way'

In *GlobalWork: Bridging Distance, Culture and Time* (Jossey-Bass, 1994), Mary O'Hara-Devereaux and Robert Johansen recommend that new teams, during their first meeting, begin crafting a unique "Third Way" of getting work done. The goal, attainable only after several meetings, is to develop approaches to work procedures and relationships that all members find practical (if not necessarily preferable) and that no one finds intolerable.

An e-mail protocol is a limited type of Third Way; it specifies work proce-

dures for electronic communications. All other features of collaborative work also are affected by cross-cultural variations, and all need to be carefully discussed and cautiously adjusted if the team intends to become highly effective. No team can successfully develop Third Ways unless its members are familiar with cultural concepts such as

individualism versus collectivism and are able to practice cross-cultural skills such as surfacing assumptions and suspending judgment. Trial and error play a role, too.

Here's how teams we know dealt with a key issue: members' motivation to act. Through discussion, members discovered that some felt inhibited

unless data they received were buttressed by contextual information, while others were willing to move forward with only raw data in hand. Another discovery was that the source of information was a critical factor for some (is it from a supervisor?), while others scrutinized its technical accuracy. And when members received materials deemed inadequate, some requested the missing pieces, while others remained silent due to "face" concerns.

Is there common ground here? If a team's members were determined to succeed, they found it! Some members agreed to routinely provide more background and context than usual, while others agreed to accept less than usual. All agreed that materials requiring key action steps would be transmitted with a note from a supervisor (even though this could cause modest delays on the sending side). All developed a standard reply form with check-off responses indicating what was wrong with or missing from recently received materials.

Conscientious global teams have a seemingly slow start because they work through Third Way issues like these. It's these teams, though, that finish their assignments in top form. It's these teams whose members are most likely to say, "I'd really like to work on another global project with these people!"

Time, money and managerial support

The preceding five conditions for global team success will have impact only if teams receive sufficient time, money and managerial support. One rule of thumb for funding, often ignored, is to estimate all costs and double the total.

Time requirements are harder to estimate but probably should be doubled as well. Yet if executive sponsors care about spectacular, lasting results, they'll ensure that teams have time to gain traction before being expected to produce results.

European expert Sue Canney Davison takes the view that most global teams need an external "process facilitator" in addition to the task-oriented (internal) leader. The facilitator's role is active in the early stages, when cultural and organizational issues have maximum ability to reduce traction and Third Ways are being negotiated. Skillful, cross-culturally adept process facilitators work themselves out of a job.

Davison notes that one company calculated the daily cost of its global team at $150,000 and the daily profit from its best-selling product at up to $3 million!

If an external facilitator can genuinely smooth and speed the work process, even by a few days, how much might he or she be worth?

Global teams and human evolution

Over hundreds of thousands of years, humans collaborated and competed exclusively face-to-face. Only in the 1900s did it become practical to pursue relationships at a distance. Only now, in the 1990s, has it become practical to do daily work at a distance.

Global teams are trying to succeed at an undertaking that no prior generation has attempted. As evolutionary beings, are humans well prepared to collaboratively perform complex, long-term tasks without face-to-face interaction? We believe the answer is no.

The distinguishing characteristic of humans is that, by thinking and planning, they can overcome their evolutionary limitations faster than any other animal. What we've presented here is a way in which members of global teams can do exactly that. ▦

DEVELOPING E-MAIL PROTOCOLS

E-mail and other electronic links are wonderfully efficient. The problem is they make everything more efficient, including simple misunderstandings, escalating conflicts and cultural clashes.

E-mail protocols mitigate that problem by supplying guidelines for using groupware, e-mail, faxes, voicemail and other electronic networks. Each team should begin developing such protocols at its first meeting and refine them at later meetings. A cross-cultural consultant can facilitate this process.

The protocols addressed issues such as carbon copy and length limitations, topic guidelines, participation requirements, and hierarchy. A team we know asked itself: "In terms of time-to-action, what does 'urgent' mean to each of us?" Discovering wide differences, they restricted the use of "urgent" to rarely needed 24-hour turnaround deadlines.

Another team we know developed an electronic ritual of solidarity. Every Friday, all members connected on groupware; each related an occurrence that week that made him feel proud. Before long, they were mentioning their children's soccer goals and piano recitals more often than their work accomplishments. Mutual trust soared.