

Collaboration, Communication, and Culture

Tips for getting the best results out of global teams

by Jack Keogh

Doing business in global locations can be a jarring experience - akin to trying to find your seat in a dark cinema or trying to assemble the right pieces in a puzzle. Today, international virtual teams are increasingly large and complex, and are separated geographically. How big can a team be before it can no longer be considered a team? My own experience suggests that the effectiveness of a team drops when the membership goes past 20. To manage a bigger team requires very specific conditions for effective collaboration. One of the key conditions, especially for geographically dispersed teams is face-to-face contact.



In order to form relationships, people need to get together in order to become acquainted with each other. Without some minimum face-to-face contact, it is difficult to foster genuine collaboration. Teams that capitalize on pre-existing relationships have a greater chance of success.

Collaboration:

With so much technology available to help a global workforce function, it's easy to lose sight of the human element.

- The “human factor” requires frequently scheduled in-person planning meetings, strategy sessions, or conferences to help build stronger internal relationships. These relationships are what help teams function at their best.
- Effective collaboration across geographies or managing global operations cannot occur by simply purchasing communications and project management software.
- The leader and the team members must address basic issues around interpersonal skills and working in a team.
- Don't overlook the value of training in team dynamics, whether employees are in the same location or halfway around the world.
- Envision training as an investment and not as a cost - because skill sets around project management, conflict resolution, and handling difficult conversations are vital to the success of any collaboration, more than ever in recessionary times.

Communication:

Effective communications are vital to maintain overall company culture.

- Favor face-to-face communications whenever possible.
- Bring managers together two to three times a year for a few days to talk about challenges and solutions.
- Have resources and processes in place to make sure customer needs are being met, especially when times are tough.
- Actively solicit feedback from your customers (internal and external) and stay close to them how in order to be sure that you are meeting their needs
- Try not to err on the side of over-communicating (e.g., copying everyone on the e-mail message) while neglecting face-to-face meetings, however brief.

- Think smart. In the measure you're your teams are high performing make sure that you streamline communications leaving space for team member's initiative. Many leaders over-define the work, which can kill creativity and cultural synergy.

Culture:

At Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC over the last 4 years, we are seeing more organizations requesting help with multinational teams.

- Team members from different cultures can learn to leverage the synergy that arises from differences.
- Develop a new paradigm for dealing with cross-cultural issues: problems are made to be solved (that is, after all what managers do) but the "dilemmas" that arise from culture need to be reconciled. This requires a mindset that can hold divergent points of view, recognize them as valid and find common ground that usually represents a completely new or different solution.
- Schedule one-on-one calls or small group calls on a regular basis for purposes of clarifying issues as you go along. This is especially important with a globally dispersed workforce, functioning virtually.
- Identify deficiencies in skill sets, attitudes, and behaviors of employees to help prevent unexpected fires.
- Make sure team members are clear about roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities.

In studying the dynamics of successful teams, we find five factors that affect performance:

- executive support
- solid HR practices around collaboration
- the strength of the team leader
- the structure of the team itself
- the strength of interpersonal relationships

We also find that cross-cultural differences aren't the only concern when trying to build a productive working relationship: many leaders underestimate the importance of personality differences and social skills. In most situations we incorporate training in personality style differences into our multicultural team training

Any behavior can be misinterpreted in the wrong environment, The key is to understand the culture in which a person or company is operating and to be aware of the differences in order to adjust accordingly.

In sum, the interpersonal side of global relationships cannot be overlooked.. A subject matter expert may not be the best person if he or she doesn't have the right skill set to respect differences and to deal with people.