



Communication and Culture: People Issues in a Global Environment

By Siow L. Vigman

Building effective global teams continues to be a challenge to many corporations. It is estimated that the global team failure rate may be as high as 70 percent. In “Building an Effective Global Business Team,” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 2001, in a study of 70 such teams, only 18 percent considered their performance “highly successful,” and the remaining 82 percent fell short of their intended goal.¹ Despite the increased pace of globalization and the need for effective global teams, not much progress has been made in creating them.

Two integral components that contribute to the high failure rate of international teams in the global environment are *communication* and *culture*. The failure factor is a people issue that cannot be solved easily by formula because the variables in these two components change with each international team depending on the team composition and the types of international assignments.

The three significant factors that cause international teams to fail because of issues in communication and culture are: (1) lack of team alignment, (2) inability to cultivate trust, and (3) lack of clarity of team objectives.

Communication Barriers: Geography and Language

When team members are separated by geography, the inability to have physical interaction does not allow body language, reactions and the sense of room energy to be a part of the communication process and it inhibits the ability for the team to collaborate well. Team members can be out of sync due to differences in time zones and this can make live communication difficult to accomplish. Live communication ensures better output, according to a new study from Duke’s Fuqua School of Business.²

Language barriers come in many forms. There are team members who speak different languages, or have difficulties articulating clearly in the common language. Even when members speak the same language, there are regional differences in meaning, semantics, pitch and accents. English speakers often have difficulty decoding pronunciation, syllable stress, and cadence of the foreign English speaker. Asians are primarily separated by regional dialects, and even need a common language for themselves. Native speakers will often speak loudly to a foreigner in an attempt to help a foreign speaker understand better. Being spoken to loudly

often comes across as condescension. Volume does not overcome language barrier. Use of local idioms, jargon, and acronyms further complicate the language barriers among team members.

Cultural Barriers

Differences in customs, assumptions, beliefs, group values, religion, and history can create tension and misunderstanding among team members. In general, the Western culture values individualism. The classic American saying “The squeaky wheel gets the grease” stands in contrast to the Eastern value of the “we” and the deference embodied in “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Westerners will express their unhappiness and displeasure through their tone, expression and body language. Easterners are reserved and are careful about showing such expressions. Their norm is to conceal displeasure in front of their supervisors. In the West, respect is “earned” based on knowledge and performance. In the East, title earns respect. In Eastern cultures, gender makes a difference in the workplace because of the bias that men should not report to women. In the West, gender equality is becoming the norm. These types of cultural differences, particularly the less visible and unconscious traits that propel a person’s behavior, will invariably impede effective teamwork unless they are skillfully addressed.

Overcoming the Barriers of Communication and Culture

Two approaches can help overcome these barriers and can create effective international teams. At the macro level, a corporation can implement an organized corporate program, and at the micro level, the selection of the right manager for the team is a critical success factor.

A well-planned corporate program to build an effective global workforce across the organization is a strategic investment in the company’s strategy for growth. Senior management with the support of a skillful HR department must champion this undertaking. For example, IBM established a global mentoring program in 2008 to increase the flow of knowledge and to develop talent company-wide, overcoming geographic barriers by fostering collaboration and promoting cultural intelligence.³

A proactive corporate approach is not yet the norm for most companies. As a strategic investment, it requires time and money to develop both the necessary leadership and workforce with the right skills for the global environment. With volatile global markets and stagnating economies in many countries, many companies have made “quick-fix” cost reduction and optimization their top priorities. International teams are often hastily put together without the proper planning, and talented managers are put into their new roles in a poorly planned “sink or swim” approach.

A manager who can successfully lead an international team must have the necessary interpersonal skills to resolve communication and cultural barriers. “One key to getting anything of value done in the work world is the ability to see differences in people and to manage against and use those differences for everyone’s benefit.”⁴ In a “sink or swim” approach, senior management or HR should have an assessment process to ensure that the manager has the necessary interpersonal skills, and if not, to provide training as needed. Key interpersonal skills to promote effective collaboration include empathic listening, respect for others, openness to new ideas, and the ability to value and utilize the differences in people and cultures. Having a manager with the right skills ensures that the team members will be well integrated and coordinated to work together effectively despite communication and cultural barriers.

Working with the International Team

1. Communication: Establish a proactive communication process.

- Make an introductory call to each direct report before the initial group meeting. The manager will be able to have an initial assessment on language and accents for comprehension, and plan accordingly to ensure success at the first group meeting. If there are accents that are not understandable, do not ignore the problem since it will not go away. Find ways to resolve the issue. Is there another teammate who speaks the same language who can translate? Is there an option of an interpreter?
- If the team can travel to one location, conduct the initial team meeting in person. It gives the team members a better chance of connecting and encourages a personal responsibility to the group. If not, video conferencing is preferred over teleconferencing. Lay the foundation of the team culture: promote an open give-and-take environment, encourage input and find commonalities.
- When working together, do not assume that everyone is always comfortable enough to speak up, ask questions or bring up issues in a group setting. Listen for the silence in the group. Discuss and assess what silence represents to each individual when there is a group discussion. To some, silence represents consent or agreement. To others, it could represent the fear of speaking up, a lack of engagement or political self-promotion.
- Throughout the project, reiterate the value of speaking up and encourage team members who may be self-conscious about their accents or their ability to articulate well to contribute.
- Set up and follow through on team communication protocol: set up a recurring weekly team call to ensure alignment and progress, set flexible work hours if needed to address different time zones, define e-mail protocol (response time, use of cc and bcc, and format), and the manager’s preference of communication in handling urgent matters.
- Ensure that all employees understand local jargon, office abbreviations or acronyms.

2. Culture:

- Initiate the dialogue on working styles and the cultural differences that affect it. Assess cultural attitude toward work ethics, acceptable work hours, work-life balance, and ambition, so that these factors are considered to manage workflow.
- Be proactive to openly addressing any destructive prejudice and cultural stereotypes. It will keep the communication open and mitigate the risk of team breakdown.

Building an effective international team to work well globally takes the alignment of people, technology and procedures. Whether through a well-planned corporate program or a just-in-time manager with the right skillset, it is paramount that the communication and cultural barriers in the global workforce are understood and addressed. Taking this action will increase a corporation’s success rate in building effective global teams.

Endnotes

- 1 Vijay Govindarajan and Anil K. Gupta, “Building an Effective Global Business Team,” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, pp. 63-71, Summer, 2001.
- 2 Duke Today, Laura Brinn, “Global Business Teams Need Time to Talk, Not just E-Mail,” January 20, 2010, <http://today.duke.edu/2010/01/globalteam.html>.
- 3 Global Mentoring. “IBMers Learning From Each Other,” <http://www.ibm.com/ibm/responsibility/mentoring.shtml>
- 4 Michael M. Lombardo, Robert W. Eichinger, *FYI: For Your Improvement; A Guide for Development and Coaching Guide*. Development views and news you can use from the people who know; Competency: Interpersonal Savvy; Lominger Limited, Inc. – The Leadership Architect® Suite.

Recommended reading:

- Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, New York: The Guildford Press, 1995.
- Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and organizations: Software for the mind. Revised and Expanded*, 2nd Edition, New York: McGraw Hill, 2005.
- Glenn Rifkin, “The soft skills of Global Managers,” Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, an excerpt from Harvard Management Update, June 5, 2006. <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/5370.html>

About the Author



Siow Vigman has experience in the positions of COO, CFO and CHRO. She began her career at KPMG Peat Marwick and PriceWaterhouseCoopers Entertainment Division. Her experience includes key roles at Mars, Inc., Guitar Center, IndyMac Bank and Vin Di Bona Productions. Most recently, she was the Interim CFO/VP of Finance for the e-Commerce Company for Guitar Center, the world’s largest musical instrument retailer. She can be reached at siowvigman@aol.com.