Creating Inclusiveness with Global Virtual Teams

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Years ago as a graduate student I learned a tough lesson while working on a semester-long project with a Korean and a Japanese classmate. The team dynamics broke down when I made the assumption that team members need to contribute equally to complete the project. As we muddled through our project, rife with misunderstanding and miscommunication, we were finally able to identify the ways our expectations differed. My expectation from an American perspective of working on a team was that we were equal partners and as such we were equally responsible for introducing ideas, showing initiative, and doing the work to achieve a successful outcome. At the time, I never even considered that my team members had a different approach to how a team should operate. Much later, I realized that their cultural perspective shaped their view that a team consists of a designated leader who, based on age and experience, tells the others what to do. Taking initiative and distributing the workload equally was not part of their worldview. This was a cornerstone experience in enlightening me on how important it is to clarify each team member's expectations *prior* to starting a project.

Have you experienced a similar scenario? I've learned a few tricks over the years from my own experience and from working with clients. First, there are the typical logistical difficulties with synchronous communication due to different time zones and local technology infrastructure that may be incompatible. Second, language competency and accents create communication misunderstandings. And finally, cultural differences are often the elephant in the room. While most people can articulate their frustrations, probing deeper to understand *where* the differences stem from becomes more complicated. A particular challenge we encounter with our clients is how to leverage the differences to create higher performing teams. Too often people seek similarities, mistakenly convinced that this is the key to success. "If only they would work like me" or "why can't they see the urgency of getting things done" are frequent comments we hear. While it's simplistic to expect others to "work just like me" given the cultural diversity of today's marketplace, there are some simple steps to foster an inclusive environment that will ultimately lead to more synergy.

One of the key factors to create team cohesiveness is to determine culturally-relevant ways to engage, motivate and validate the team members. Since the meaning of a "team" is often culturally derived, it is critical to first identify the different approaches to how teamwork is viewed.

Some important considerations as you create your culturally-diverse and geographically-dispersed teams:

- How much trust is needed prior to starting a project and how can you build trust and credibility when working remotely?
- How will you develop your team's identity in a virtual environment?
- Who is responsible for making decisions and what expectations are there for input from the different team members?
- What motivation and reward systems are most effective for your different team members and is it possible to develop a system that will engage everyone?
- How might real or perceived hierarchy affect team dynamics and willingness to take initiative?

When these and other factors are not taken into consideration, there can be a type of dysfunction that sets in with team members not being in synch. Creating inclusiveness requires team members to examine the differences and validate each other's unique expectations of how a team should operate to be successful. While addressing these issues may not be your team's first priority, dedicating the time to attend to your team members' different cultural needs will ultimately provide a more harmonious, cooperative climate where people feel recognized and part of the whole.