Preparing Global Virtual Teams for Success

With proper training, connection, and creativity, true collaboration can be accomplished in global virtual teams. BY NEAL GOODMAN, PH.D., AND SUSAN M. BRAY

In the late 1980s, one of the authors of this article was director of the distance learning program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, NY. This was before the term, “online learning,” had even been used, and RPI’s graduate programs were shared with the industry via TV-like production facilities and satellite broadcast. A faculty member who taught in this program wanted to use a new and exotic piece of hardware in the classroom that took some time to figure out and integrate. That device? A “mouse”!

One cannot overestimate the impact that technological advances, the emergence of the Internet, and the realities of a global economy have had on learning and working over a few short decades. In fact, we refer to this profound and pervasive change as a “new sociology of work.”

Today’s workers find themselves in global enterprises and on teams that are cross-cultural in nature and interact in virtual, technology-driven environments. It seems appropriate to ask if we are adequately preparing both leaders and team members with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in this environment.

The cost of not asking this question is great. Failed mergers, acquisitions, and joint ventures due to cultural misunderstanding result in the loss of billions of dollars. Cross-cultural communication breakdowns, fueled by the lack of context and connection that can characterize virtual communication approaches, contribute to breakdown of trust and failed projects. And yet research indicates that fewer than 16 percent of employees in multinational organizations who work virtually have had any specific preparation or training for this work.

The good news is that a body of knowledge for successfully leading and performing effectively on global virtual teams is emerging. We are beginning to identify the best practices of high-performing global virtual teams and the attributes of those who can lead them successfully across the demanding virtual, cross-cultural terrain they navigate. We also know that the payoffs can be great. Those who can harness the inherent creativity of varying cultural perspectives have the opportunity to lead through innovation.

One champion of this notion is Unilever Senior Vice President of Human Resources and Communications Fiona Laird. “Organizations that remove the artificial boundaries around how, where, and when work gets done are those that are winning in today’s marketplace,” Laird says. “They are more flexible, more efficient, and better able to respond to rapid change.”

TOP SUCCESS FACTORS

A recently developed training program, “Leading Global Virtual Teams,” has identified what we consider to be the “top success factors for global virtual teams.” These success factors draw on a meta-analysis review of the literature and the examination of hundreds of cases with global virtual teams in corporate environments. The program is based on a model that considers those factors that relate to the fact that the work is carried out virtually; those factors that relate to the fact that the work often is carried out across cultural differences; and the fact that these two phenomena interact in interesting ways. The model further depicts the critical role of trust and leadership in tying all of this together for productive team outcomes. Emerging from this model are some practical and useful tips for team leaders and members.

Here are two examples of these tips:

• Emphasize strong team start-up with the goal of alignment and building of relationships. We all know first impressions matter, but this is especially critical in the case of global virtual teams. So a critical role of the team leader is to ensure a robust team beginning where the seeds of connection, purpose, and mutual accountability are sown. Leaders consider the kinds of activities that must be undertaken in the preparation and launch stages to gain the commitment of...
far-flung team members. The goal is to consciously build a form of “swift trust” that will sustain the team through challenging times ahead. In this context, we consider the critical role of a Team Charter, which answers the question: Why does this team exist? Likewise, a Team Operating Agreement is critical and must answer the question: How will this team go about conducting its work?

- **Stress mindful use of collaboration technologies.** Mindfulness is a term that has its roots in Zen Buddhist meditation but has entered the American mainstream in recent years. It relates to bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience or the present moment. We find it a useful concept for cross-cultural and virtual work. It is the opposite of the “knee-jerk” response in which we act instinctively without considering the context of the moment. Those who navigate successfully across cultures are mindful of their own cultural approaches and how they might affect others. In applying this concept to the use of collaboration technologies, we are calling upon people to consciously create and construct the cyberspace environment of their team to support the required communication tasks. In brick-and-mortar places, we often take care to design the space to support and enhance work. “Cyberspace” is the equivalent for global virtual teams, and yet we often just grab the technologies at hand without careful thought to the nature of the space we are creating.

The tips noted above are just a few examples of the many concrete and practical things that can be taught to improve the effectiveness of global virtual teams. It is critical that team leaders devote the necessary time for team building and training throughout the life of their teams. The ties that bind virtual teams together can be fragile across time, distance, and culture. But we are firm believers that virtual environments can be humanized, and that connection, creativity, and true collaboration can be accomplished in global virtual teams.

If you have any best practices for training global virtual teams, questions, or case studies to share, send them to ngoodman@global-dynamics.com for inclusion in future articles that address this important topic.