

Program Management Commentary

Importance of Cultural Awareness When Managing Distributed Teams

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As an organization embarks on a strategy of growth, it often employs various tactics to expand beyond its current national boundaries. Some of the most common tactics include acquiring or merging with companies, forming strategic partnerships with other companies to share and distribute portions of the development delivery system, and expanding operational components of its business into other geographical regions of the world.

Regardless of the strategy and associated tactics, one of the results is common – the organization expands its pool of resources to include people from other cultures, thus becoming a multi-cultural entity. When doing so, it therefore must undergo various forms of transformation to effectively and efficiently create a new organizational environment that embraces, encompasses, and leverages its new cultural diversity. This will require changes in the organizational values, norms, assumptions, and how individuals within project teams interact with one another.

The job of blending and aligning national, company, and functional culture many times falls upon the project team leaders. Successfully managing and completing product, service, or infrastructure development efforts likely will become significantly more complex and difficult as one begins to manage over widely dispersed company sites.

People from a diverse set of backgrounds and experiences will bring different behaviors, routines, values, and ideas about the work of the team. The team leader must embrace this diversity of people on his or her team as individual members that make up a collective work unit, and act as a coach and role model for the rest of the team to help them embrace the value of diversity. What the team must learn is that there is great benefit to having differences in personality, values, opinions, and ideas working toward an optimal business solution.

Establishing team chemistry on a global project team is considerably more complicated than on a domestic team. This is because of great cultural diversity and the increase in communication challenges due to language and time zone barriers brought about by the geographic distribution of the team. As a result, it takes much more time and effort to blend national, organizational, and functional culture into a team culture where values, attitudes, and meanings come together from team members representing several nations.

There are a number of things that successful global team leaders do to accelerate the establishment of team chemistry. These include:

- Establishing team norms,
- Fostering social presence, and
- Using information-rich communication technologies.

Establishing team norms means determining how the team will perform its work and conduct itself. In particular, focus on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, meeting types and forums needed, communication preferences, how decisions will be made, and reporting methods, messaging, and frequency. Make sure to gain agreement on the norms and then set the expectation that the team behaves and acts in a way that upholds the norms.

To prevent some members of the team from becoming invisible, make sure that all team members know one another and continue to foster connections. Initial introductions are critical, and must go beyond the usual statement of name, functional group, and one's understanding of the role one plays on the team. It's more effective to also ask each individual to describe his or her expertise and professional background, as well as something interesting and significant about his or her culture. Some global project and program managers have created simple social networking websites for their teams that provide member profiles.

Though not officially a technology, face-to-face interaction is far and away the most effective way to share information and facilitate team collaboration. One of the greatest outcomes of an initial face-to-face meeting is an acceleration of team chemistry building. Through both work and social interaction, the team will quickly begin to establish the foundational elements of team chemistry:

- The team learns how to work smoothly and unselfishly under the leadership of the team leader and develop the ability to respect and get along with one another;
- Each team member begins to recognize the specific role he or she plays in contributing to the goals of the team;
- The team members begin to blend their individual efforts into the work of the other team members;
- Team members establish a mutual feeling of respect, loyalty, and empathy toward each other; and
- A sense of team identity begins to form.

Since regular face-to-face contact is not possible for a global team, the use of videoconferencing technologies will provide more interaction than voice-to-voice contact alone. At a minimum look to use videoconferencing or desktop videoconferencing

technologies to allow team members to see one another while they communicate and collaborate.

Once initial team chemistry has been successfully implemented within the project, when conflicts and issues arise in projects far from the home office, the probability is sufficiently higher that the corporate culture, vision and expectations will prevail over local and national cultures in order to ensure that a sense of corporate purpose and focus is not lost.

If you have questions or want additional information about the subjects discussed in this article, please contact us at any time. If this was a useful article, please share it. Thank you for reading. The Program Management Academy Team: Russ Martinelli, Jim Waddell and Tim Rahschulte. Email Address: info@programmanagement-academy.com. Website: www.programmanagement-academy.com.

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