Galvanize global virtual teams with clear operating principles

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The best way to get a new team out of starting gate is to pull everyone into one room for a few days to carve out goals, hammer out differences, develop team norms, and agree on deliverables, schedules and roles. Investing in this process allows a team to get through the "storming" phase quickly.

In today's global organizations, however, most teams don't have the luxury of face-to-face bonding time. Team members tend to work across countries, time zones and organizations. They must rely on remote interactions, both synchronous and asynchronous, to mobilize the team and get everyone and moving in the right direction.

Virtual teams that invest time and energy up front in creating explicit operating principles and team norms stand a far better chance of moving forward more quickly than teams that omit this critical step. This edition of *Communiqué*, co-authored by Chrysalis principal Nancy Settle-Murphy and LeaderGrow, Inc. president Robert Whipple, focuses on a few crucial areas that remote global teams most need to pay attention to when articulating their operating principles.

- **Selecting the right people:** In the formation of an intercultural remote team, the selection of individuals is critical. Establish a list of needed characteristics for team members, and screen all proposed members with care. For example, ideal global virtual team members have an understanding of and tolerance for cultural differences that can affect work patterns. They are also flexible with respect to work hours and feel comfortable using multiple forms of communications. Effective virtual team members have a high tolerance for ambiguity and can work easily with little direction.
- **Setting realistic expectations:** Think about the areas in which unrealistic expectations are most likely to trip up the team, such as deliverables, schedules, resources, and support required. As a team, clarify mutual expectations and validate whether they are realistic. Create a means by which members can reset expectations when needed. Remember that some cultures are more conservative when setting expectations and need to consider the big picture first. Other cultures tend to be overly ambitious in their promises and need frequently reality-checks by others to ensure they're really able to deliver.

- **Establishing a "safe" environment:** The online environment offers the opportunity for people to raise issues, ask questions, offer opinions or contribute new ideas without inhibition. By establishing a culture where everyone feels encouraged to contribute openly, the team leader can tap into a rich diversity of ideas. Agree on ways people can ask for help without embarrassment, and determine how concerns can be surfaced without fear of retribution.
- **Handling conflict:** Consider what type of conflicts are likely to arise, particularly those that may be most difficult to handle remotely. For example, what if one member consistently fails to fulfill commitments? Or what if vital information is not shared openly with all? Agree how certain conflicts will be handled, who will be involved, and what communication method will be used. Make sure to reflect the cultural make-up of the team when thinking through your choices. Some cultures are more comfortable being direct and assertive while others place greater value over group harmony than speed of execution.
- **Team communications:** Establish norms early on for inter-team communications as well as communications from the team to other stakeholders. Think through answers to questions such as: Does every team member need to attend every meeting? If not, what are the exceptions? What type of information do we place in our shared workplace, vs. sending via email? What is the not-to-exceed response time to emails when action is requested? Who outside the team needs what kind of information, by when? From whom?
- **Time zones:** When working in a synchronous mode (Instant Message, telephone, video conference), some remote team members are forced to work at awkward times. Agree as a team when same-time meetings are necessary, and consider rotating the times to share the burden of working during normal sleep time. Consider which work can be done asynchronously (e.g. via email or a shared workplace) to allow all team members to work at the most convenient times.
- **Making decisions:** Decision rights need to be discussed so there are no surprises. Once the lines of authority have been established, all team members need to remain compliant or people may start playing political games, which will quickly undermine trust. Intercultural teams must accommodate the various negotiating styles of different members. For example, many western cultures call for "first, best offer" tactics, while some eastern cultures expect some dickering. Keep in mind that many virtual teams have no obvious leader, which makes agreement regarding decision rights more challenging and more critical.
- **Reporting relationships:** With virtual teams, the reporting structure is rarely static. Team leadership can morph as the nature of tasks changes during the life of the team. All team members need to feel that they are contributing with

maximum creativity and energy. It's often best to allow team members to go where their energy leads them as long as that direction is consistent with overall goals. However, all reporting relationships must be clear to all from the outset, especially regarding deliverables and resource requirements.

- **Project scheduling:** When mapping out a project plan, keep local customs in mind. For example, reflect all national and religious holidays. Consider planned vacations as well. In some countries, especially in Europe, team members will be taking extended vacations in the summer. While some cultures accept working on weekends or during vacation times, many others do not. Make sure that the entire team works from a shared calendar, which should be posted in a place where all members have ready access. Encourage team members to block out time well in advance on their electronic calendars to make scheduling across borders and time zones easier.

- **Tracking progress:** Many team activities will span a significant time period. To give the team a greater sense of progress needed to maintain momentum, try tracking progress against sub goals. This way, the team can modify tactics if necessary and can celebrate many successes—small and big—along the way. Using some type of visual barometer, such as a dashboard or thermometer, can be especially helpful for a virtual team. Make sure everyone understands the criteria for reporting progress. For example, if a dashboard is used, agree on what "green" really means.

The use of virtual teams to get work done across borders is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception, even for smaller organizations. Global remote teams need to learn how to operate successfully in a virtual world, navigating through invisible cultural tripwires that can easily thwart progress. Organizations that know how to nurture and support global virtual teams have a competitive advantage over organizations that treat all teams and their leaders the same.

Interested in learning how you can jumpstart a global virtual project team with an action-packed two-day onsite workshop? Learn more about our Project Jumpstart workshops. To understand how cultural differences can be advantageous to your global virtual team, find out more about our cross-cultural training sessions. For information and articles by Robert Whipple, visit http://leadergrow.com/

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