

Helping Global Teams Compete

By Catherine Mercer Bing and John W. Bing

In global organizations, every team intervention - from measuring team performance to team development training to other consulting initiatives - needs to consider the dynamics of global teams. The definition of "good team member" varies from country to country. The concept of "effective leadership" may also differ. As a result, global teams sometimes find themselves reconfiguring into national collections of sub-teams - that is, a Japanese subteam, an American subteam, a French sub-team, and so forth - that may misunderstand each other's expectations and approaches.

Cultural values

An underlying cause of the success or lack thereof of global teams may reside in the definition of what it takes to be a good team member or leader. Cultural values play a significant role in these definitions. For example, a French team member may jump in to assist a U.S. colleague he or she perceives is in need of help. Americans, however, generally have a strong desire to act as individuals; thus, the U.S. team member might interpret the French colleague as undermining his or her job by interfering.

Cultural and language differences

In addition to whatever else might be at the root of global team issues, cultural and language differences obviously add to the complexity. It's important to acknowledge those differences up front and create opportunities for discussion of different perceptions. If you're able to leverage these differences, you can improve creativity and add value to your global team.

Miscellaneous interferences

Other reasons may exist for a global team's sub-par performance. Its problems may stem from a specific team leader's approach, a lack of organizational support for the team, or because individual rewards overshadow team success. In such cases, training to build a global team may fail because you didn't know or address the real reason for poor team performance.

Why use measurement?

Global teams, because they represent significant corporate investments, require proactive attention and preventive maintenance, which are always preferable to disaster recovery. A

proactive approach - taking the team's temperature periodically - can help identify if and when it needs training and what kind of training.

A proactive approach positions the training professional as a strategic thinker - someone who brings value to the business by detecting problem issues early and preventing them from getting bigger. The training professional becomes a business partner with a bottom-line focus. Measurement techniques using appropriate tools can also help management compare many global teams within the same business sectors, adding to management's capabilities.

Unfortunately, it usually isn't until a problem arises that management calls on the training provider for help. Requests for team development interventions after the fact - after a client already believes that training is the solution - usually means one of two things: The team leader knows he or she needs help, or the team leader may have attempted other solutions without positive results. The leader, or his or her manager, then calls on the training and development professional to provide a solution.

Even if providing team training addresses the problems, it may be at considerable expense to the business. For example, consider the costs associated with time lost on the job. With global teams, add to that the cost of international travel. Business leaders value preventive measures that save such costs.

Instead of waiting to be called on after a problem is identified, use a proactive measurement approach to get useful information on the state of the team. Team leaders can use the same information for self-development. If you provide your findings to the leader and the team, you are training the team on how to interpret information. In that way, team members learn how to analyze and interpret issues, which, in turn, reduces the need for additional development by outside consultants. By sharing team findings and using the ensuing discussion as a team activity, you've already conducted an intervention.

Outside intervention

Using the proactive measurement data, the team can also, if necessary, make its own decision to call for outside intervention. For example, a global pharmaceutical drug discovery team (made up of

medical scientists) used an instrument designed to analyze communications and other team functions. They discussed each other's answers to the tool's questionnaire and discovered a disparity of views among team members. By reviewing their answers before proposing an intervention, the team was able to define team issues together. That discussion led to accepting an intervention that addressed the topics on which they agreed they needed help.

Combining team training and leadership development

A global team leader, alerted by low team scores on the topic of understanding roles and responsibilities, decided to use an orientation for new team members as an opportunity to lessen the confusion. In a meeting, the leader asked team members to describe their roles and responsibilities briefly for the newcomers. She combined team training and leadership development and doubly improved the team.

Conducting periodic measurements provides a team and its leader with baseline information against which they can measure changes. They can also use the data to answer these questions:

- Where was the team when it started?
- Where are they now?
- Did the last intervention make a difference? If so how much?
- On what specifically do we need to provide a more focused training intervention?

One size does not fit all

Even when you can resolve team problems by training, one type won't fit all teams, especially global teams. If diagnosed dysfunctions remain after the team leader attempts resolution, it's necessary to provide training on those issues. When neither training nor leadership development works, however, the solution may be a change in team leadership. Working in partnership with business leaders, training and development professionals can help smooth those kinds of transitions.

Proactive, periodic team measurement benefits global organizations by reducing the amount and expense of training and by focusing necessary training on identified problems. Questionnaire results provide a baseline against which you can measure team changes. To develop team leaders, use the questionnaire to identify ways for them to resolve issues in regularly scheduled team meetings. Training interventions that take into account cultural and value differences create stronger global teams. By comparing measures across teams, management improves its oversight and support of such teams.

And, most important, the proactive approach positions training professionals as strategic thinkers committed to improving the bottom line.

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