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Intercultural Collaboration in Global Teams

by: Pamela Hinds and Catherine Cramton

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Although an increasing number of organizations are relying on technology-enabled geographically distributed teams, these teams often are difficult to manage and fall short of performance expectations. Global teams frequently suffer coordination problems, crises of trust, and unhealthy subgroup dynamics. Some of these challenges are the result of cultural differences among team members.

The authors of this paper describe the challenges and opportunities in intercultural collaboration and the impact of culture on best practices for globally distributed work teams. The focus of the research is on interdependent, long-term project teams that are globally distributed across two or more sites within a single company.

The authors first review the meaning of culture, present several definitions, and discuss two perspectives on culture. Cultural Dimensions, based on work by Geert Hofstede, looks at culture from several dimensions. Cultures can be rated across five dimensions. These include power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term vs. short-term orientation. The study authors suggest thinking of cultural dimensions in a way similar to a Myers-Briggs survey. "Although not very reliable as a measurement tool, it still provides a useful way to think about how and why coworkers might behave differently. It also provides the basis from which to start a conversation about culture and values."

The second approach to culture is a nested view. The authors present a layered model, attributed to Spencer-Oatey, where cultural values are at the center, but are embedded in a context that includes systems and institutions, rituals, behaviors, artifacts,

and products. This is a more contextualized, holistic view of culture—one that considers practices, the local context, the institutional context, and people's values. The authors prefer this view and note that the challenges and tensions in intercultural collaboration often stem from incompatible practices.

Drawing on their own research and experience, the authors present five best practices used by effective geographically distributed teams. These are:

- **Site visits.** Extended time spent in coworkers' locations enable people to get to know one another in a way that enhances collaboration, even after the travelers return home.
- **Cross-cultural liaisons.** Assigning people with experience in the context and culture at team location sites has been used to great success in globally distributed teams. Team members with these cross-cutting roles are able to transfer contextual information as they bridge subgroups.
- **Team stability.** It takes time to learn about cross-cultural differences, understand distant team members' context, and determine ways to reconcile these differences and adapt for the good of the collaboration. Long-term, interdependent teams with stable membership show that the organization values its investment in the team.
- **Absence of threat.** Creating an environment in which people feel secure enough to let their guard down and learn from their distant colleagues is essential to the team's success.

The final section of the paper discussed additional best practices for intercultural collaboration on globally distributed teams. The authors build on the work of Eric Richert, who studied distributed workgroup practices. These include:

- Group formation. Forming a strong, cohesive group is clearly important in globally distributed teams, including the development of goals, schedules, protocols, and shared processes. It is particularly important to make sure that these are jointly developed so that they can be aligned with local practices.
- Communications. Frequent and inclusive communication is critical on global teams. Informal communication is particularly important because contextual information often gets shared in these more casual, unstructured conversations. However, some communication structures that work well for collocated teams are not appropriate for multicultural, distributed ones. For example, a recent study found that dense communication structures (e.g. everyone on the team talking with everyone else) caused coordination problems on global teams.
- Information and idea sharing. Readily sharing information across sites is important in globally distributed teams and formal knowledge management systems can facilitate this. The authors caution that systems and tools tend to have a Western cultural bias. They advise that tools and technologies for knowledge sharing be culturally neutral or flexible.
- Role modeling. Managers should role model the technologies being used and the agreements made on the team. However, in some cultures, manager's roles are different than in Western countries. It may be important to explicitly as for desired behaviors from subordinates.
- Adaptation. Adaptation is critical in globally distributed work teams; however it needs to take place across all sites rather than expecting a few sites to make all of the adjustments.
- Performance management. Performance management that includes evaluations and feedback of team members is a relatively Western concept and may not be accepted well in other parts of the world.
- Conflict management. Practices for managing conflict are deeply rooted in culture. Some cultures value avoidance; others value direct confrontation. Communication and patience are particularly useful when conflict management styles do not align.
- Technology utilization. As with other distributed teams, technology utilization is critical to support communication and coordination on globally distributed teams; however, it's best to ensure that the technologies are flexible to local practices.

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About the author: Pamela Hinds is an Associate Professor at Stanford University in the Department of Management Science & Engineering and Co-Director of the Center for Work, Technology, and Organization. Over the last decade, her research has primarily focused on distributed teams, particularly those crossing national, cultural, language, and time zone barriers. She is co-editor with Sara Kiesler of the book *Distributed Work* (MIT Press).

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