MANAGING TEAMS:  
A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Globalizations of business at the centre of the accelerating pace of change that has ushered billions of people across the world into the 21st century posing radically different challenges for all. The volume of international business continues to expand dramatically from year to year. The advent of the Internet and e-commerce is not only increasing the flow of goods and services but also increasing the speed at which talent - and therefore competitive advantage - can be transferred across the globe. This involves the ability to create a learning environment in which participants can learn and unlearn, re-learn, and re-apply knowledge and skills to new situations. Since many researchers have suggested that working in teams provides an effective framework for meeting the need to achieve performance goals in organizations that require greater flexibility in responding to market challenges and opportunities, how organizations are able to succeed in unfamiliar commercial situations depends to a great extent on the skills and attitudes of its people resources and their willingness to work effectively in teams that extend beyond familiar boundaries. Under this backdrop the objective of this paper is to explore various aspects related to management.
teams including talents from several cultural backgrounds and implications of cross-cultural team working, particularly the cultural and behavioral challenges. The paper shall also touch on some of the potential ways to train and manage talent so that the cultural boundaries mean no more than those between departments enabling to contribute to an effective teamwork.

Key Words: Globalisation, Talent, Team, Cross-Cultural, Organization

INTRODUCTION

Of all the skills persistently ranking as the most important skills employers across the globe look for in candidates, being a “good team player” is foremost. However, while there is consensus on the need to be “good team players”, people coming from different cultural backgrounds often have very different ideas of what that means. They assume that all teams operate according to the set of unspoken rules with which they are familiar. As a result, major issues arise when culturally different people work together on the same team often leading to team breakdowns. A few examples that can be quoted are:

1. When a team of Asians and Americans working on the same project were having lunch at their desk, the Americans gave them their Asian counterparts some of their own food to the American team members. They turned down the offer politely and commiserated that they should eat their lunch. This was a shock for the Asian team members who believed in the spirit of sharing in team. On the other hand, for the American team members it was at all rude, they were just following some very different social rules.

2. An American Manager in Mexico found it strange and difficult to handle when working on a project he was responsible for a particular portion of the project and the project manager never gave the same of an individual, but always a team of people. The American was taught that the responsibility is assigned to a team and not to one individual in no one’s responsibility and will likely not get done. Eventually he learned that the project manager was not trying to protect an individual or avoid his responsibilities. Projects and portions of them in Mexico were always the responsibility of a team. And they still got done.

3. A Canadian was surprised when he moved from the Manila office of one of the Big Four accounting firms to the Toronto office of the same firm. After two weeks of training and preparation he was assigned to a project and started to work on a team. He could not understand why his managers and colleagues were not copying him on their e-mail messages, particularly those exchanged with the client. He wondered what he had done wrong to be excluded from the team in his first project. When he discussed this point with his cross-cultural coach he was explained that this was totally normal.

4. The leader of a pharmaceutical research team that included people located in the United States and people located in Spain while sharing his experience mentions how initially everyone on the team was really enthusiastic about the idea of working with different people. Quickly the mood of the team deteriorated. The Americans started to make derogatory comments about the Spaniards and vice-versa. Instead of looking at the others as allies, they started looking at them as enemies and started to talk about sides. Eventually, things became so bad that, whenever one side completed some experiments and sent the results to the other side, the other side would redo the experiment to prove that the first side was all wrong. The leader lost a lot of sleep during that time.

All the above examples clearly show how a person’s sense of individualism, hierarchy, and risk tolerance due to the difference in cultural background greatly influence his or her approach to teamwork and make it much more challenging to build and manage cross-cultural teams that not only are highly productive but also meet the human, social and cultural needs of the team members. In spite of all the obstacles and the complexity of cross-cultural teamwork, distances and time zones, language differences and the cost and time involved, such teams are becoming key strength of organizations and are being used worldwide to manage cross-functional projects, work on assembly lines, reengineer business processes, develop marketing strategies, and accomplish a host of other tasks essential to the organization. More and more every day, thousands of companies around the world need to call on their people to work in cross-cultural teams to communicate and cooperate across radically different cultures, to manage widely dispersed, fragmented organizations, and to handle multiple time zones in a single bound.
CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

The increasing complexities of scientific, sociological, and commercial issues in companies demand individuals from different cultural backgrounds and different nations to collaborate in order to resolve global problems and take advantage of global opportunities. Consequently, groups of people of different nationalities come together to work interdependently on a common project across cultures and time zones for extended periods of time. Such groups are called cross-cultural teams.

Such teams work on projects that are highly complex and have a very widespread set of customers, solve problems in many areas simultaneously, and/or sustain or significantly increase organizational profitability and service. And of late organizations and leaders are also recognizing the necessity and value of high-performing cross-cultural teams and are increasingly turning to HRD professionals to help build such teams. They understand that cross-cultural teams’ power to link and leverage resources, move and manipulate those resources, and provide competitive advantage by enabling them to acquire the best workers, produce the best products and attract the best customers.

However, since cross-cultural team working involves working with people whose culture, the way they do things, may be different from one’s comfort-zones, whether these be based on knowledge, experience, habit or national culture, such team members encounter many aspects of working across boundaries that extend beyond amalgamates within the marketplace viz. joint ventures, partnering arrangements and other forms of strategic alliances call on the employees of different corporate cultures to work closely together in teams with former competitors, customers or suppliers whose working practices may be very different. And the members of cross-cultural teams need to change their frame of reference from a local or national orientation to a truly international perspective. This involves understanding influences, trends, practices, political and cultural influences and international economics. Team leaders in particular need to understand and develop competitive through Talent Management strategies, plans and tactics that operate outside the confines of a domestic market-place organization. Being able to understand and lead cross-cultural teams is critical. Leaders must be able to manage the differences, if they want the cross-cultural teams to operate successfully. They need to be able to deal with issues of collaboration and cross-cultural variances. They need to understand different and sometimes conflicting, social forces without prejudice and speed up business development by exploiting and adapting learning between countries and markets. Above all they need to develop processes for coaching, mentoring and assessing performance across a variety of attitudes, beliefs and standards. All this can be possible only by recognizing and acting on the potential barriers to effective cross-cultural teamwork.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMWORK

When people of different professional, organizational or national backgrounds work together, cultural differences are inevitable. Some of the potential barriers are as under:

1. There can be fundamental differences in what two teams believe to be important, and in how they expect staff and customers to be treated, allocation of tasks, attitudes to time, including the keeping of deadlines and punctuality, the ways in which meetings are conducted, how poor performance is evaluated and how work is co-ordinate. For the team working to be successful such key differences in culture need to be identified and taken into account since the ‘us and them’ approach among the team members can be a bigger source of conflict in a cross-cultural team working since the perception of who is ‘us’ can change almost overnight.

2. Next problem arises when the employees in the cross-cultural teams experience corporate messages differently. In countries where there is high uncertainty avoidance, such as Switzerland, people prefer to reduce the stress of uncertainty by having rules and set procedures, can lead to relatively bureaucratic approaches and formalized relationships that may seem at odds with corporate demands for flexibility, innovation and customer sensitivity. Power-distance relates to the degree to which society permits highly centralized decision-making. In societies with high power-distance, the idea of empowerment may seem out of sync with how things are really done.
In US companies, for instance, employees are likely to be required to accept corporate approaches rather than having local management autonomy. Similarly, relatively high-power distance is reflected in the way in which different roles are rewarded. These parameters and others can create differences which may lead to conflict over power within a cross-cultural team.

3. Differences are also apparent in communication styles within a cross-cultural team, especially when there has been a misunderstanding. For example, a typical Italian response might be to increase verbosity whereas a French response might be to appeal to imagination and logic. A German response might be to absorb the counter-argument and make a logical reply. The typical UK response would be to understand and use humor whereas the US response would typically be to resist more firmly, provoke a fight, concede and conclude. Unawareness of stereotypes on the part of the members of a cross-cultural team may land them into problems and affect results.

4. Working across boundaries requires people to bring their particular skills and knowledge to the achievement of a joint task for which no individual is likely to take the credit. If the organization’s reward processes reinforce the importance of individual, rather than team performance, employees may consider that doing their day job is what will be taken seriously when performance is being assessed and may lack commitment to the cross-cultural team work.

5. In a matrix structure, team members often continue to have a clear reporting line back to their functional manager, with only a dotted line to the person responsible for the team. When project teams are seen as “bolt on” to the teams, the ordinary work employees can experience mixed loyalties. In practice, this can mean that people lack commitment to the team or that they are withdrawn from the project before their work is done. Some employees consider that they have become guardians of their functional specialist within the multifunctional team, putting their own functional standards and “turf” issues ahead of the need for collaboration. For many people working in this way for the first time requires them to develop a specific mindset, one in which flexibility and responsiveness to others form the basis for collaboration. Lack of employee trust can lead to a loss of commitment to the team’s task.

6. Ongoing uncertainty of local employment markets is another barrier to effective team working. In these days of knowledge management, there is the potential collision of two apparently contradictory edicts – “knowledge is power” and “knowledge is to be shared.” From the organizational perspective there are clear benefits in the pooling of information and the generation of shared knowledge, thus preventing the organization becoming dependent on any single employee’s knowledge. Many individuals, however, have recognized the importance of building their expertise to the point where they are valued for it and become indispensable. Some people may indeed believe that sharing their expertise beyond their own boundaries is not in their own interest since it can represent a reduction of their own power base, status and job security.

7. Team working can put pressure on hierarchical relationships in organizations, and often accompanies restructuring and de-layering. It can appear to challenge the traditional management structure, posing a potential threat to the role and status of senior people. Authority from formal position will be challenged by authority from technical knowledge within a new generation of highly qualified specialists seeking decision-making powers to work more effectively. Even when the organization has assumed a flat and flexible appearance, old hierarchical policies may still be barriers to effective teamwork. Power-distance, both inside and outside the team, can throw the development of creativity and mutual responsibility. From within the team it may mean that members with lower power status feel that their contributions are constrained and not valued. More so in cross-cultural teams where there exists a tendency for technical experts to pull rank, with the financial expert always having the last word. The customs-driven approach to running businesses now suggests that the people closer to the customer are likely to be the source of new knowledge, products and developments. In cross-cultural teams these functional status differences may be a source of constraint.

8. One of the biggest challenges for both organizations and members of cross-cultural teams is making the most of the enhanced skills and knowledge gained by the individual through their cross-functional roles within a cross-functional team when such teams disband.

Broadly speaking, cross-cultural teams need to have clarity about
what the team is to achieve, and team members need to understand their role within the team in order to avoid the potential barriers that may become threats to the effectiveness of team working. HR and team leaders can play a significant role in ensuring that cross-cultural team working is not undermined and the potential barriers are identified and removed through appropriate training provided along with eliminating the conflicts of loyalty that being a team member can entail.

DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS THROUGH TRAINING

Since training is the key area in which HR can address the issues and support cross-cultural teams, the training can enable the team to 'gel' as a group of individuals as well as to expand the team's ability to respond to global needs. Various types of training programs that can be conducted for such teams are as under:

1. Training programmes emphasizing the company’s strategies, structures, and processes can be conducted in order to help team members use their judgment when faced with mixed-culture situations.

2. Training programmes on Cross-cultural team building can be conducted to enable the team to develop work processes that maximize the benefits of diversity.

3. Interpersonal skills training such as in conflict resolution and negotiation as well as technical training such as project management skills may be useful.

4. Training on language and communication skills may need to be given special focus so that team members can develop ways of getting their messages across to one another via different media – e-mail, telephone, and videoconferencing etc. – in ways that are sensitive and effective.

5. Training in aspects of knowledge management can be helpful in enabling the team to capture and share knowledge as well as data.

6. Personal organization skills can also be an area of training depending upon the requirement of the team.

Apart from the above any other training programmes may also be selected but what is of utmost importance is the need for preparing the cross-cultural team leader so that she can exercise leadership to the teams consisting of members from across a number of countries and cultures simultaneously. Given the diverse backgrounds of team members, and that there was initially not much common ground between them, the role of the leader in providing a tangible focus and direction for the team becomes all the more important. The leaders need to be both strategic and operational. It is important that they be seen as someone who ‘leads from the front’ setting a strong vision and objectives for the team. They perform the important role of providing drive and determination in the face of difficulties. Hence, leadership can be a crucial issue in negotiating the cross-cultural team’s relationship.

Overall, training can be very helpful, and can encourage team members both to develop their own team learning and also to add to the organization’s learning about its changing market place. However giving people the chance to develop and apply the high-level skills required of cross-cultural teams is only one side of the equation. Rewarding and using these enhanced skills to greater effect to the mutual benefit of the organization and the employee is the surest way to tap into the motivation and commitment of cross-cultural teams.

CONCLUSION

Creating high-performing cross-cultural teams is a challenging business. The complexities of cultural difference including the potentially conflicting functional demands added with the complex nature of such teams’ work, blending as it does the demands of both local and the global business perspectives, calls for a high level of skill and team understanding. Yet every organization needs to quickly and systematically establish cross-cultural teams as the organization’s success, if not survival, depends on building effective cross-cultural teams.

REFERENCES


