

Global Teamwork & Cultural Differences

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Global teamwork inevitably requires the participation of people who have different cultural backgrounds. Differences in the ways members perceive teamwork and how they perform their roles within the team frequently produce serious challenges to the effectiveness of the team. A study of 58 global business teams, reported in *MIT Sloan Management Review* (Summer 2001), identified the most critical challenges. Team members were asked to rate challenges on a 7-point scale according to how they perceived each factor's importance to the team's success and how difficult it was to achieve [7.0 = most important, most difficult].

Critical Global Team Challenges

| The Challenge | Importance (7-point scale) | Difficulty (7-point scale) |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cultivating trust among members | 6.52 | 6.06 |
| Overcoming communication barriers | 6.35 | 5.56 |
| Obtaining clarity regarding team objectives | 6.05 | 4.61 |
| Aligning goals of individual team members | 6.04 | 5.44 |
| Ensuring team knowledge and skills | 5.62 | 4.66 |

Issues of trust, communication, individual goals, and shared objectives are all greatly influenced by the different cultural backgrounds of the team's members. Likewise, the members' knowledge and skills are shaped within the cultures of their respective home countries, as are each member's core values.

What Is Culture? Culture is neither a tangible thing nor an observable event, but its importance for global business people cannot be overstated. What exactly is culture? An excellent short definition is:

Culture is how we do things around here.

This definition is on-target because it focuses on "how." It's not *what* people from different cultures do that makes cultural differences important for business people, but *how* they do those things. For instance, in businesses worldwide there are employees and supervisors, and the latter *somehow* oversee the work of the former; that's *what*. Culture is about *how*, in different regions, the employee-supervisor relationship is structured and maintained so that work gets done. Here's another definition in the form of an analogy:

Culture is to a society what personality is to an individual.

This definition is on-target because it captures a quality that all of us sense: that there are ways in which individuals who have the same cultural background – Chinese, Russian, Italian, Australian – are similar to one another...at least in *some* ways, if not necessarily in all ways. The author of this definition is saying that this fact is analogous to the uniqueness that we sense in the personality of each friend and business colleague. That same author, Geert Hofstede, also penned a more typical definition of culture:

Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another.

This definition is on-target, too, because of the phrase “collective programming of the mind.” People with experience creating computer programs, even very simple ones such as macros, recognize that the programs arrange for certain tasks or processes – *what* needs to be done – to be carried out each time in a similar manner – *how* it is done. A program provides a set of directions for the way a computer task is to be carried out; a culture provides a set of directions for the way a human activity or relationship is to be carried out. One big difference: A computer is strictly directed by its program. A human is advised and guided by his or her culture, but the human has a unique personality that plays a guiding role, too.

The Role of Values A useful way to gain insight into cross-cultural differences among groups from different world regions is to focus on their contrasting values and beliefs. Values and beliefs guide the behavior of individuals; *shared* values and beliefs guide the behavior of groups. Intercultural researchers have long explored the contrasting values and beliefs of national groups. Among the contrasts that, over past decades, have proven applicable to the improvement of global business relationships are these:

| | |
|--|---|
| Task Things get done when processes are in place. | Relationship Things get done when relationships are in place. |
| Explicit Meanings are stated directly. | Implicit Meanings are often stated indirectly, need to be inferred. |
| Individual “Me” is more important than “we.” | Group “We” is more important than “me.” |
| Risk-Taking New is good; change is desirable. | Risk-Avoiding Continuity is good; change is to be avoided. |
| Tight Time is to be controlled; punctuality counts. | Loose Events occur at their own pace; flexibility counts. |
| Shared Power, authority distributed within a group. | Concentrated Power, authority focused on a few group members. |
| Linear Reasoning is analytical, step-by-step. | Circular Reasoning explores options in an unstructured way. |
| Facts Thought uses data and concrete experience. | Thinking Thought uses concepts and logic. |
| Simple Focus on basics, little attention to context. | Complex Focus on understanding things in full context. |

Value contrasts such as these create opportunities for misunderstandings and conflicts within teams whose members are from different cultural backgrounds. Gaining awareness of these contrasts is an excellent way to begin identifying the value differences that are causing problems, or could soon cause problems, within any global team. Referring to the above list can help to identify underlying causes, to provide clues to resolving problems, and to improve collaboration...and perhaps even build synergies.

This article is also in GROVEWELL'S Professional Knowledge Center at Grovewell.com/pub-team-differences.html



* Edited with additions by Cornelius Grove