
Global versus International

By Lothar Katz

A colleague of mine was involved in a large and complex project. His responsibilities included managing weekly conference calls between U.S. headquarters and two overseas development groups, one in Nice, France, and the other in Bangalore, India. One day, we had a casual conversation about how these calls went.

"It's always the same thing", he said, tongue in cheek. "When we discuss plans and next steps, the Indians agree with everything and the French agree with nothing. After the call, they'll go and do their own thing anyway!"

Every time someone asks me about the pitfalls of managing global projects and teams, I remember this story. What my colleague described, and actually mastered much more effectively than he made it sound, is a great example of the challenges of working in a global, rather than merely international, project environment.

Let me define these terms: the term 'global project' is commonly used for one reaching across several countries: as in the above story, three or more local teams collaborate, with each working in its own cultural, political, and legal setting. In contrast, the term 'international' here describes project collaboration between teams crossing only one cultural, political and legal border, for instance in a US-India project.

The Challenge

Leading in a global environment presents a much more complex challenge than working in an international one. To explore the differences, imagine that you're an American holding a conference call with a French-only group. It would probably be most effective for you to present plenty of information to this group, explain the rationale behind your plans and actions, defend those through logical arguments when challenged, be outspoken where needed, and persistently drive the debate forward until your counterparts signal agreement. By taking this approach, you are adjusting your style to better match that of the French side, which increases your likelihood of winning their support.

If, on the other hand, the call was with an Indian-only group, you might want to focus your communication mostly on its leader, refrain from appearing argumentative or confrontational, emphasize benefits to the Indian side, underline areas where agreement was already reached, and allow sufficient time for decision making, even if that meant not reaching a decision during the call. Again, adjusting your style will increase your effectiveness across cultures.

But what do you do when you are dealing with both of these groups on the same call? When communication practices, decision making styles, and other cultural preferences seem mutually exclusive? When passionate arguing could make you more compelling with the French side but would let you appear overly pushy in the eyes of the Indians? When delaying a decision might be best from an Indian perspective but could be a mistake with the French team?

Adjusting Cross-Cultural Practices for Global Teams

No matter with which culture or cultures you are dealing, the first rule of engagement is to learn, for each of them, what you need to know about the ways people communicate, collaborate, and make decisions, to learn about what they respect in leaders and what hierarchies mean to them, and to learn about everything else that is relevant for your interactions.

When managing a global team, your leadership approach will also need to change. No longer can you simply adjust behaviors and practices to only one other culture and then expect that to work across the board. Instead, it is crucial to ensure that everyone on your global team has a working understanding of key cultural characteristics of their own culture, as well as those of everyone else. Your communication practices will need updating, too: simultaneously working with multiple cultures requires much greater clarity of communication, as well as more frequent clarifications of objectives and intentions. Moreover, you as the leader of a global team may frequently need to fill roles such as moderator, translator, and mitigator between the different cultures and sub-teams involved. Successful global project leaders not only continually hone these skills but are also highly flexible, adaptable, and willing to disregard their personal egos when required.

Are **you** ready for this challenge?

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
