Managing Globally - An Introduction for New Managers

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Introduction

As organizations are increasingly built upon collaborative groups drawn from multiple locations, managing the challenges of ‘virtual teams’ has become a critical competency for executives. Those challenges become significantly more complex when the team spreads across several countries or becomes truly ‘global’ with membership in three or four continents. Facing these challenges for the first time can be daunting. Every organization is different and will have its own unique circumstances. Similarly, every function, such as finance, marketing, legal, requires its own specialist knowledge, qualifications and vocabulary. However, there are some common approaches that can help improve every new global manager’s chances of success.

The Basics

Displaying an understanding of five basic factors – time zones, seasons, communications limitations, language, and etiquette - establishes the manager’s empathy with the team. Empathy is essential to build a platform for a success. Conversely, a lack of care in these practical matters, which are often overlooked in academic / training literature, can set the manager up for failure as they miss the opportunity to gain the trust of their team.

Time zones

Finding acceptable times for meetings with team members around the globe is difficult, especially if the locations include Europe, the West Coast of the United States and Australia. There are a number of helpful applications and web sites¹ available to help make the best selections, but inevitably the time chosen will be a compromise. The empathetic manager may choose to vary the time of the regular meetings, letting everyone share the occasional early morning or late night.
Seasons

In some industries, seasonality can impact the business directly as demand for products and services change. However, seasonality can have an indirect impact on team performance in every global organization. The empathetic manager understands the prime vacation periods for their staff (e.g. August for France, January for Australia), the impact of important national holidays (e.g. Thanksgiving in the US), cultural celebrations (e.g Chinese New Year), and religious observances (e.g. Ramadan for Muslims). The successful global manager does not necessarily need to understand these seasonal factors in great depth (although it can be pleasurable to do so), but must be aware of and sensitive to their practical impact upon availability and state of mind of their team.

Communication Technology Limitations

It is tempting to assume that the communications technologies we use in business are ‘perfect’, that all participants in a teleconference enjoy the same experience. However, despite the many advances of the past several years, this standard is not always the available. Audio (and video if used) quality can vary considerably, country by country, and even location to location. The empathetic global manager understands this, recognizing that the lack of contribution to a global meeting from, say, their Swedish team members may not reflect disinterest but a lagging connection. Taking active steps to ensure that all are given an opportunity to participate is the mark of a good manager.

Language

English is the global language of business, both between and within companies. Its use in multinational companies, even those who are headquartered in non-anglophone countries, is now largely taken for granted. ² Like the communications technologies, it is also tempting to assume the English language skills are also
perfect, that all team members have the same ability to express their ideas and preferences. However, this is not the case. Many team members will speak English as a second language and can lack the confidence (or vocabulary) to express themselves fully. Their potential contribution to the team can be impaired. Again, the empathetic manager paces conversations skillfully to ensure inclusivity regardless of language prowess.

**Etiquette**

‘Etiquette’ is an important concept to grasp for the new global manager. There are many subtle differences in business etiquette, minor nuances, often on seemingly trivial items that, if breached, can cause a bad impression and thus reduced effectiveness. Examples include:

- **Salutations** in written correspondence, which these days is usually by email. It is common for managers in the United States to skip any form of salutation and burst directly into the topic at hand; this goes unnoticed by American recipients but can be seen as disrespectful or even hostile in other parts of the world.
- **Business cards** or email signatures that omit the telephone county code (e.g. +44) are seen as lacking a global perspective;
- **Date formats** that assume mm/dd but could be interpreted as dd/mm (or vice versa);
- **Dress** - the variations in interpretation of a standard ‘dress code’ (e.g. the ubiquitous business casual) can cause embarrassment and reduced effectiveness. There is no shortcut for new managers in this area. They must pay close attention to the norms of the team members and always be willing to learn and adapt.

**Getting More Advanced - Understanding Employee Motivation**

Getting these basics right demonstrates the critical difference between a truly global manager and, say, a UK-based manager of a global team. With that credibility established, the new manager can expand into the more advanced and
specialized skills required of their particular function (which are not topics for this paper).

However, the ongoing motivation of a global team is common to all managers. This requires an enhanced understanding of the different attitudes to work, different definitions of success and recognition. Clearly this applies at an individual level, but it also fits within different country norms. For some countries, notably the United States, compensation is the primary driver to attract and motivate employees: employees there, regardless of role, respond very directly to compensation-based incentives and are less concerned about other forms of recognition. In other parts of the world, other factors are much more influential. In India, for example, opportunities for career growth, such as acquiring new technical skills or leading larger teams, are highly valued. In much of Europe, ‘work life balance’ is critical, thus rewarding success with additional vacation time or extending work from home arrangements is a more effective motivator. These impressions are borne out both anecdotally from global managers and confirmed by regular surveys. The successful global manager needs to recognize these differences and learn how to motivate their teams accordingly, while maintaining coherent performance. An effective step can be to establish the team’s unifying goals while providing different rewards for their achievement.

**Conclusion**

A new global manager should take on their responsibilities with heightened sensitivity. They can build trust by demonstrating empathy with their team. This puts a premium on observational and listening skills and a willingness to learn. To quote Dr. Stephen Covey, ‘seek first to understand, then be understood’. It also requires attention to detail: small, unintended inconveniences or perceived slights can undermine the manager’s position very easily. Subsequently once the basics have been mastered, understanding (and using) the different motivational levers prevalent in different countries will be important to ongoing success.

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1 e.g. www.timeandate.com
2 For more on this topic, see Harvard Business Review, May 2012, Global Business Speaks English