

Going Global: The Challenge of Collaboration

The Challenge and Opportunity:

Can a small group of people who see and respond differently to the world make a difference? Indeed, history shows it is the only thing that ever has."

-- Margaret Mead

Technology advances have made it easier, cheaper and faster to communicate around the world. This, in turn, has radically accelerated the growth of globalization presenting great opportunities in expanding markets as well as major challenges to existing ways of working. Managing the complexity of working globally and virtually is a survival skill for the new economy.

With globalization we automatically get diversity. This global diversity has increased the complexity of whom we work with, where we work, how we work and when we work. Removing the barriers of time and distance have given us enormous economic and creative opportunities while increasing personal and human challenges.

Who will lead and thrive in this new economy? What changes in thinking and behaving will be required? What tools and techniques can we use to bridge the gaps in time, distance and culture?

The purpose of this article is to answer these questions as well as to present "collaboration" as the new way to work successfully at a distance.

Who will thrive in the new economy?

Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her recent book, *eVo/ve*, described people she called "collabronauts or those willing to leave their home planet to bring back knowledge of strange new worlds and new civilizations.' These pioneers of the new economy will have to be masters of collaboration.

They may take the form of Global Alliance Managers, Global Account Managers or Strategic Alliance Partner Managers in large companies. They may be outside consultants. They may be systems integrators. It will not be the title that counts, even though in the case of the large companies, the words global, alliance and partner are used.

It will be those who can develop trust, seek creative results, develop an attitude of learning and listen to deeply understand others. It will be those who know how to

acknowledge and leverage the talents and gifts of all the people in their series of networks. It will be those who can balance the needs of disparate groups and individuals with the organizations they support. It will be those who can collaborate across organizational, functional, geographic and cultural boundaries.

What is collaboration?

Long before information technology, people have been collaborating locally to start new companies, create new markets, become product innovators. Research and experience have shown us that diverse cross-functional teams have the greatest potential for innovative breakthroughs. We also know that these same teams have the greatest potential for conflict and breakdowns.

Making the Case for Collaboration

I recently facilitated a Senior Leadership Team of a high tech startup and saw a classic example of an armed camp. The Sales and Engineering VP's were hostile and not talking to one another. Each was holding to his position. Engineering said "if you make that sale, we won't be able to support it." Sales said, "If we don't make more sales, we won't be in business." Both parties had passion about their position. Both were right in their own way. But being right or winning was not getting them, or the company, anywhere.

They had to call in a neutral 3rd party to facilitate dialogue. The good news was that after really listening to each other's point of view, they were able to carve out a solution that worked for both of them and the business. They had created a "third way." They were no longer competing but collaborating.

Collaboration involves the full use of team members' talents and skills. It recognizes that team members may perceive things differently but still want to achieve the same goals. A good collaborator is someone who recognizes the differences and utilizes them to achieve these goals. People learn to use mutual influence, not authority, to combine the best from the team in order to accomplish their goals. They have to learn to negotiate from a place of mutual interest rather than use traditional win/lose techniques. A friend shared a good example of how the use of language can increase or decrease the potential for collaboration.

Ralph Guggenheim was the producer of the first animated feature length movie, *Toy Story*, created by Pixar. This effort involved a number of people from different disciplines and different companies as Disney was the co-creator. The vision to produce the first full length feature computer animated movie was clear. This was the unifying force.

Ralph described the classic tension that existed between the Director and the technical folks. The Director said –"I want you to show the toy getting tortured by the

Baby. Put the toy in a bowl, dripping with oatmeal.”, The technical team said it couldn’t be done digitally. The Director recognized that he was approaching an impasse and that the technical area was a foreign country to him. He abandoned his traditional dictatorial role and approached in a new way saying, “Don’t take me so literally. What I want is for you to capture the spirit of what I am going after. “

By rephrasing his remarks and suggesting to the technical folks to capture the spirit, the Director was giving them the freedom to determine the best form. The tension between the Director and the technical staff was resolved creatively because the Director had the insight to realize that technical folks think differently. Instead of using his authority to get his way, he rethought how he was going to communicate his message. By rephrasing his remarks and suggesting to the technical folks to capture the spirit, the Director was giving them the freedom to create, not just replicate his idea.

He focused on the outcome and was flexible about how it was to be accomplished. The result, by the way, was a Toy dripping with Cheerios – equally torturous but much easier to create digitally. The truth is if the team had actually tried to give the director what he asked for in the first place, they might have spent weeks and a lot production dollars in the process.

From the previous examples of collaboration, we’ve seen that there has to be a “third way” of looking at things. People cannot hold to their fixed point of view. Competing with each other puts them at arms length—in armed camps. Collaborating with each other gives them the ability to create something they’ve never even imagined before. These were examples of local collaborations –within the same country, time zone and location. We’re beginning to see a pattern that works.

The Old Way Doesn’t Work Anymore: Adopting The Collaborative Mindset:

How many times have you hear the phrase—“Business is War.” As a Global Account Executive for an international training and consulting company I had a lot of training in the art of strategic and competitive selling. Everything was based on outsmarting the competition, capturing marketshare, displacing the competition and other pugilistic activities. You were ready to compete and win at all costs.

The strength of this kind of thinking, which had led America to be at the top of its game economically, began to backfire as American corporations began looking for their real revenue growth overseas. New Global Sales Teams were set up to support multinational corporations. I had lead responsibility for a few high profile global accounts in the high-tech industry. I was asked to collaborate with my colleagues around the world to expand these accounts and increase our offering and installed base worldwide while providing the customer local support.

To be successful, we first had to assess ourselves. What kind of mindset were we operating with? Was our focus on losing control, sharing commission and worrying about damaging our reputation? Or was the focus on expanding your influence, learning new things, making new friends, making a difference for your customer. Each Global Account Manager's level of awareness was different. Their mindset was a big determinant of whether or not their opportunity for overseas expansion was a success or a failure.

Fortunately for me, one of my colleagues in Singapore was coming to San Francisco on her way to our company headquarters. She asked to meet with me so we could begin to understand how best to work together on some of the accounts I was leading. From the first meeting, we established how we were going to build something together, what it could do for the customer, our company and us. Over time and distance, I came to rely on her wisdom and judgment in a variety of ways. Not only did we both expand our business, we set up a network of resources in Asia who could respond rapidly to customer requests. We did this all virtually—through email, faxes and a few phone calls. Most of all, she taught me about the value that collaboration can bring to leading a global account team.

Changing the Way We Relate

Having a collaborative mindset is one of the key success factors in thriving in the new economy. A second key success factor is to understand the different ways people relate to one another. Do they focus on time and tasks or on relationships?

Culturally as well as individually, people fall somewhere on a continuum which looks at how people spend their time. Do they spend it accomplishing tasks or on building relationships? Task oriented cultures gear their lives around the clock. For example, Americans, Swiss and Germans think of TIME AS MONEY. French, Brazilians and Mexicans, for example, look at TIME AS A CONTINUUM. The time and task oriented people like to get straight to the point. At meetings, it is all business. If there is any time left, task-oriented people might socialize.

Relationship-oriented people and cultures organize their life around people, not the clock. Business is very circular, not linear. These cultures or people are more flexible. They are not slaves to their watches. They socialize first and then conduct business.

To build trust on global teams as a Manager or Team Leader, you must be both task and relationship focused. While this understanding seems very rudimentary, putting it into practice while leading a global team is anything but trivial. The reason for this is that we make judgments of others based on our own filters. And when you don't physically work with people, it is easier to maintain your biases. This is where the distance factor is deadly.

Let me cite an example from one of the global project teams I was asked to help. This was a team involved in clinical trials for a major pharmaceutical company. The team consisted of people from the US—both West Coast and East Coast, England, Switzerland, France, Germany, Mexico and South Africa. As it turned out, the biggest conflicts were between the Americans and the English. The English felt the Americans lived to work. All they thought about was work and making money. They didn't care how long they were at the office. The English felt they were confronted about everything and were feeling overpowered by the Americans on the team. The Leader of the Project resided on the West Coast of the US and asked me to help her solve this problem.

The Americans couldn't believe anyone would leave at 5PM every day. They didn't feel the English took their work as seriously and they felt it took forever to get things done. There were levels of bureaucracy in England that made it difficult to get decisions made. Instead of solving problems, people were looking at whom to blame.

How was this situation to be resolved? The drug trials had to continue. The time to market was faster as the FDA had changed its regulations. It depended on how well this team could collaborate.

I interviewed all the team members on what were the strengths, areas for improvement, opportunities and challenges the team faced in working together.

Some of the biggest sources of conflict were the following:

Results vs. process orientation (Americans vs. English, which takes into account time and task focus. It also took into account how direct the Americans were and how indirect the English were. The Americans always seemed to have a sense of urgency while the English did not. The list went on and on. But it was this fundamental difference in orientation that was stalling the project. Judgments were made on both sides. What made it difficult for some to understand is that everyone spoke the same language, (English) but didn't get the same message. Don't assume that you see the world the same just because you speak the same language.

We had to surface the differences in thinking, relating and communicating in order to move forward. We had to come up with team standards all could agree on. We had to come up with values the team could live by. The Team Leader's role actually got moved to England to speed things up as the biggest database was maintained there. There was an agreement to respect the differences, change the role and location of the team leader, negotiate how decisions would be made, how people needed to communicate with one another and the agreed upon standards for the communication—how long it should take and in what format—voicemail, email, etc.

All this could have been taken care of at a first face- to- face meeting. Many members of the team had no working relationships with each other. There was no trust so judgments occurred. It was only the US Team Leader who tried to build a bridge for the team. Finally when deadlines weren't being met, she got authorization to have a face- to- face meeting to get these conflicts resolved.

I do think it helps to have an initial project team meeting face-to-face to build trust. Trust is built more from socializing than it is in the task focused meetings. Since the corporation's orientation was very time and task focused, the initial step was not deemed necessary. It was a lot more costly to do it later on as the team already had many misunderstandings. They had to begin by unlearning what they had already done. The better way would have been to ask—what is the best way for this team to operate to accomplish our results? Who is on the team and what are their talents? What can we count on each other to deliver? What are our roles, responsibilities, deadlines? All the traditional process agreements that teams make are necessary but there is so much more to do to be successful on global teams that are virtual. And all the processes and agreements have to be formalized and agreed upon. Much more thinking and planning are required. The Team Leader needs to build good relationships with key team members in each geography. In order to do that, the Team Leader will probably be traveling a lot more—in the early stages of the project.

The orientation to task vs. relationship will require a lot more flexibility on the part of the Team Leader, Global Manager and individual contributors. It will require a lot more patience. In other cultures outside of America, family and friends have a great deal more importance. There may be a lot to gain from taking time to be more human.

A third key success factor is to understand what and how to communicate to collaborate successfully.

Changing the Way We Communicate

Individual people seem to have preferences for communication. Some feel more comfortable picking up the phone and calling a global colleague while others prefer to use email or fax because they can communicate better in written form if English is their second language. However, it is not the communication format which is the barrier, it is the contents of the communication itself.

For example, when I was working on a project with people in Malaysia and Hong Kong, I introduced myself very differently than I would have in America. I told them all about myself, my background, where I lived, my family, my experience in Asia. It was a very long email. I invited them to share their background with me. I got even longer emails but they were so rich in content I was able to start building a real picture of who these two people were. I remember thinking that this was the first

time I felt I was using the power of the internet to connect with someone I didn't know. The "rich content" they provided me gave me a better and deeper understanding of who they were, what was important to them and how I could develop influence with them.

Their content was more focused on the environment in which they lived which included work, family, friends and culture. I learned a lot about various Chinese and Malaysian holidays—they seemed to be happening every time we in America wanted to schedule an event. However, when all was said and done, I felt that maybe we didn't have enough celebration here in the US. I started questioning a lot what we had been doing here and why weren't we more like them? They wanted to work and do business with people they liked. It was worthwhile investing time in making that happen. My thinking was expanding to appreciate their way of life.

This couldn't have happened if I had approached these two women the way I usually would have approached someone in the US. It was challenging at times. When I was feeling a lot of deadlines, I would revert to my comfort zone and want to dash out emails. Fortunately, I read them first and deleted them. I never would have been able to deepen the relationship if I operated normally. My style was too direct, task focused and written in bullets.

Communicating virtually requires a lot of versatility. You have to stretch outside your comfort zones. You have to assess how much or how little information someone needs from you to develop trust, accomplish a task, feel a sense of ownership. You have to become a lot more customized in your approach. You have to ask—Who am I talking to? What's important to them personally, professionally and culturally?

Collaborating at a distance involves changes in thinking, relating and communicating. From competitive to collaborative thinking, from task or relationship orientation to a relationship style that reflects a balance between task and relationship. Finally, we are learning to customize not just communicate information in order to connect and influence people across the virtual and borderless world.

Best Practices for Collaborating At A Distance

Over the course of the last five years, I have worked with or led a number of global project teams. I've found a number of important practices which, if followed, will greatly enhance the success of virtual and global teams and organizations. They are:

- Recruiting the right talent .
- Leading and managing the team
- Managing Meetings

- Communication
- Problem Solving
- Conflict Resolution
- Recognition and celebration

Recruiting the right talent

Assessing candidates to work and lead in the virtual and global world will require a thorough understanding of the candidates mindset and propensity for collaboration. These people will also need to have a lot of initiative, a large worldview, good team skills, high energy, strong communication and interpersonal skills and a results focus. They will need the brain power and imagination to create things that have never been done before. They need to thrive on learning new things. They will also need to feel comfortable with risk and uncertainty and be decisive. Most of all, recruit people who have a strong sense of purpose. These are people who want to be global citizens, where time, distance and culture are minimized and the human connection is maximized.

Leading and Managing the Team

Leaders and managers will have to possess all the skills above and be able to use these to develop a peak performance virtual workforce. The “leadership style” will be particularly important as using influence and not authority will be the way of getting things done. These leaders and managers will have to understand their people more individually, act more personally and connect with them emotionally. As one Global Team Leader said to me: “I had to continuously ask—who’s on the team? What are their needs? How will their needs get met? My antenna was up all the time as to what would enhance the team. It was also important to understand what they meant by the team concept since this concept means different things in different cultures. I had to understand how hierarchical the culture was to see how people would relate to each other on the team. All of these cultural nuances had to be understood so people wouldn’t take things personally.” (Team Leader for a Pharmaceutical Company)

As a global team leader, it is important to visit the global sites, sit down and develop trust face- to- face. You need to find out how information is processed and how it is shared. Don’t take for granted that all people in a certain location will willingly share information. As the leader, you will need to give the team a sense of the big picture and where they fit in. Try to understand what additional priorities people have and if there are any matrix conflicts.

All the best practices for leading and managing apply in the virtual and global world. The difference is in managing the complexity of culture, distance and time. More things will have to be anticipated, planned for and communicated. Things will need to be more formal and explicit.

Managing Meetings

Outside of one to one communication and collaboration, meetings are the time where most collaboration takes place. It's important that they are planned very well and utilize the best practices below:

All meetings should:

Be regularly scheduled. This is the time people know they can come together and surface their issues and concerns. Meetings are also used to bring people closer together (the human connection) and build trust.

Have Agendas sent out in advance for input and clarification.

Have Meeting Minutes that capture the essence of the discussion and describe action required with accountabilities, dates and measures. Meeting minutes should be written in an easy and simple form. The use of bulleted notes is very helpful.

Have Ground Rules Posted—on the wall for video and face to face meetings. On powerpoint slides or email that participants bring out or access online from the project or company's intranet or internet.

Be well planned—understand the key stakeholders needs, be clear about the outcomes you want to achieve, designate roles and responsibilities in advance—who is going to facilitate the meeting, write the meeting minutes, keep time, keep people focused on the task.

Action Plans—agreed upon actions key members will implement.

Use standard English—don't use colloquialisms. Check in from time to time with non-English speakers. Ask if there is anything that they need clarified. Build this in up front so not to put anyone on the spot.

Designate a website or database where all meeting minutes and critical project items will be stored for everyone to access. Keep a group memory.

Team Leaders or Managers or Facilitators must understand any issues in advance that will influence people attending. What changes have occurred that may impact the meeting.

Teleconferences

For different time zones, rotate the time so that all groups have to stretch outside their work time boundaries. Spend a few minutes in social chit-chat. You are building relationships. Speak slowly and clearly, using good standard English. Keep things easy to process and understand. Don't force decisions to be made on the spot unless the team knows in advance that's what they are there for. Some cultures need more time to process information. Set up how the conference call will be initiated in advance. Test any speaker phones or headsets used. For people who are co-located, it is good to get them in one room with a speakerphone. Make sure there are no side conversations.

Videoconferences

For different time zones, rotate the time so that all groups have to stretch outside their work time boundaries. Make sure people have been trained on how to use the equipment. Have a process and technical facilitator present if possible. Test out all equipment in advance. Make sure you have a microphone available for those people not in the front row. Avoid information overload. Take the material you would cover in a mono-cultural videoconference and reduce it by two-thirds. Revise level of informality (US) with formality (non-US). Leave some time for relating on the front and back end of conference. However, keep conferences short as the brain can only process so much at once in another language and culture.

Face to Face

Face to face meetings are critical for the beginning of new long term projects. Throughout the project, it is ideal if the group can meet twice a year. Once seems mandatory. Leave plenty of time for unstructured or informal conversations to take place. Plan some social event or dinner where people get to know each other outside of their planned work agenda.

Communication:

It is critical to agree on which vehicles you will use for communication. When people start working together, they need to contract with each other on their preferred method of communicating—will it be email, phone, fax? Some people assume that all people and cultures use email but they don't. I consulted to a team once where I heard the following "I sent her a 100 emails and she never responded." I asked the person, "Have you ever asked the person how they liked to be communicated with?" "No,." I said "Go and find out." The answer was "I never read my emails because I get too many of them. If you leave me a voicemail, I will call you right away." The problem was solved instantly with a simple question. The lesson from this is –don't assume anything. Ask!

This lesson is true for teams as well. You can set up standards for communication, acceptable response times, preferred formats, frequency and responsibility for communication. Some companies design formal communication plans to make sure they are keeping all their virtual network informed about the state of the business, organizational changes and shifting priorities. They set up internal websites or use the internet to communicate and store knowledge about their projects.

Problem Solving and Decision-Making:

Problems need to be resolved rapidly so they do not escalate. This pertains to performance problems especially. These should not be resolved by email. They should be handled face to face or on the phone.

When other problems arise, such as how to speed up the product development process, you need to have a standard problem solving process that people are trained on. You will have to understand people's ability to think "outside the box" for alternatives. Some cultures are risk avoidance and others are not. You'll have to find a new way for the group to solve problems that people will embrace. Remember to take into consideration some cultures need for context setting and lengthy dialogue before decision-making occurs. Agree on who needs to be involved in the decision making process.

Conflict Resolution:

Conflict should be resolved face to face or on the phone. Some people try to avoid confrontation and will send out many emails explaining their position. This just delays the inevitable. Watch out what you put in writing. Your email may be copied to a number of people whom you don't want to expose this situation to.

Understand the nature of the conflict—is it role conflict, task conflict, values conflict or interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflict is often about style (speed things get done, whether or not people allow for 2 way interaction or one way command and control) Most conflict comes from a lack of understanding of another's interests and goals. It is positional—"my way is right; therefore yours is wrong." Conflict often comes from tone, timing, the choice of words you use.

Being clear about the shared values and behaviors of the team or organization helps reduce the potential for interpersonal conflict.

Recognition and Celebration:

It's important to give individuals and teams recognition on a regular basis. It gives them the energy to keep focused on achieving their goals. However, you will have to

understand how different cultures view individual vs. group recognition. Some cultures, like the Japanese, don't like to be singled out for individual praise. This would cause embarrassment.

Managers and Team Leaders should ask individuals and groups for their preferences in the recognition area. Let people design a personal system that has meaning for them. It's important to tap into what motivates a person from the inside out. A good recognition program will do this.

Celebrate the team's accomplishments on a periodic basis. Plan events to celebrate milestones. Don't wait until the very end of a project.

Future Trends for Collaborating At A Distance

There will be more virtual employment in the future. More foreign employees will be part of the virtual workforce without ever leaving home. As the infrastructure in developing countries improves, you will see a lot more of this.

There will be a lot more Global Business and more Internet interaction. Virtual collaboration will offer convenience over time as people learn how to leverage human assets virtually.

English, which is the standard language on the Internet at present, will become more prominent as the international language standard. There will be those who can communicate over the internet (written) who may never speak the language well but can participate in the global economy virtually..

As corporations tend to reduce costs., one of the first expenses has been to reduce the spending on expensive real estate. This means more people will be working from home, at least some of the time. More work will be done outside of the traditional corporate office. Some will be at home, some on the road.

Selection for Virtual Managers and Team Leaders, whether local or global will be done more carefully. People will need to be selected on their ability to collaborate successfully. These people will have to be able to value others talents and differences, understand the cultures and personal styles of individuals and be able to influence and motivate them to contribute their best across the borderless world. These managers and leaders will also need to share more control, delegate more and trust others to do their jobs. They will spend their time developing others to exploit the opportunities in virtual collaboration.

Team leaders and managers will probably spend more time on the road in a virtual organization or virtual team. There has to be some human link to keep things together. This will be the Global Manager and Project Team Leader. It will be harder on them, but the payoff for a well functioning organization or team will make it

worthwhile. They will, as in the words of Margaret Mead, be the small group of people who see and act differently. History, in turn, will regard them as our first global citizens.

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