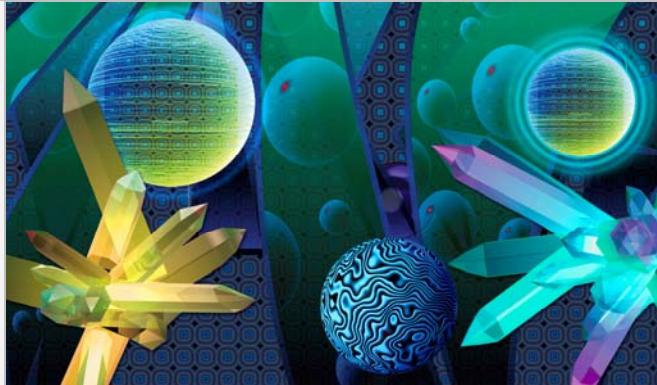


Culture Shaping

July 20, 2006

Special Interest Articles

"I don't know why we spend all this time socializing when we should just get to work"



Addressing today's challenges working with globally dispersed teams to achieve innovation, speed, and high-impact results

"That's just how we do things around here"

"I would never disagree with my manager"

When global teams assemble, each member brings a set of cultural values and beliefs that determines how that employee will engage with others. Conversations, decision-making, degree of candor, use of time, and handling disagreements, are all features that vary due to cultural assumptions. Research shows that people will resist management approaches to team processes when they conflict with their own values. Team leaders who

do not pay attention to cultural norms will never realize the potential to be gained from the team's joint work. This is particularly evident when the team must truly collaborate on a project and not just hand work back and forth to other team members.

What are signs that the global, virtual team is losing traction?

- Members form sub-groups by location.

- Individuals lag in replying to messages or don't show up for the conference call.
- People will nominally agree to a decision in a meeting but won't follow through in a consistent way.
- Members won't make full use of the technology to prepare for meetings, adopt templates for work products, or post their own work for others to see.

"We never share this information with our lower-level employees"

"Let's find the best way to get the work done"



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Working through Culture

Co-located teams may demonstrate some of the same issues with sub-cultures (e.g., marketing vs. engineering) when new members come together. Global, virtual teams add levels of complexity and implicit cultural norms that are even more difficult to mediate across time and distance.

Effective leaders of global, virtual teams take a number of steps when they first set up teams using the following principles:

- Be flexible
- Negotiate
- Compromise

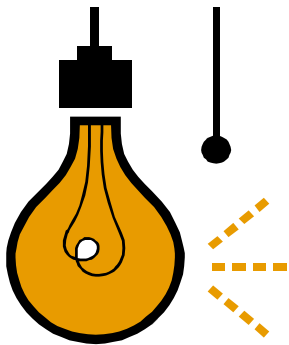
Make the Implicit Explicit

Our cultural preferences are often hard-wired, and we take them for granted. Leaders will spend initial meeting time, in person & in conference calls, encouraging

members to state those norms, using examples, scenarios, and metaphors. The discussion may be structured around work tools and process as well as the more intangible areas of managing conflict, setting priorities, dealing with hierarchies, how decisions get made, etc.

Identify which cultural norms are core beliefs

Individuals may operate under some norms that can easily be modified to fit the group's needs as a whole. U.S. managers, who are used to starting meetings exactly on time and immediately beginning the agenda, can see the benefit in allowing more social time as it is often used to build bonds and trust among people from other cultures. On the other hand, some cultural expectations are more central to a particular group and can create strong resistance when the team leader tries an approach that conflicts. Confronting each other's performance in a meeting can be viewed as highly disrespectful even though many new business practices encourage such open feedback and honesty.



In Sum

Cultural values drive our behavior

New cultural norms can be implemented when the leader involves those affected and uses skill in communicating the why and how of the new expectations.

"When I understood that the customer needed us to respond more quickly, I was able to change my priorities"

"Because we took the time upfront to understand each other's expectations, we saved a lot of headaches down the road"

"I find myself reinforcing the new rules on the phone, in e-mails, in memos. I make it a dialogue to gain support"

Leaders, with discussion and input from the group, must gauge when to accommodate (be flexible) and when to set a course for new norms that will require others to adapt. The main rule of thumb should be the business imperative. What are we trying to do to serve our customers? What's our strategy for getting there? Innovation, speed? Reduced cost? It's the leader's job to balance the business goals and expected results with the group's capacity to effectively achieve them.

Shape new cultural norms

Successful leaders who work with multiple cultures know that to just impose new cultural norms as a directive can result in heavy resistance and even sabotage, especially when core values appear to be at stake. Instead, the smart leader focuses on *implementation approaches* using valuable techniques. One, always build the business case for why the behavior must be modified. Two, consider creative ways that you can get the same results you need in a manner that is more acceptable to the group. For example, in cultures where direct confrontation on performance problems is taboo, give feedback that primarily focuses on what the person can do to demonstrate higher performance, using clear expectations and encouragement. Over time the person may become more comfortable with directness. Third, continually negotiate and compromise on expectations and new norms people are to follow. Take intermediate steps. If your team members believe that you respect their needs while achieving work goals, they will increasingly become more willing to be flexible and compromise themselves.