

International OB

Global Virtual Teams

Years ago, before the vast working public ever dreamed of e-mail, instant messaging, or live videoconferencing, work teams used to be in the same locations, with possibly one or two members a train or plane ride away. Today, however, the reach of corporations spans many countries, so the need for teams to work together across international lines has increased. To deal with this challenge, multinationals use global virtual teams to gain a competitive advantage.

Global virtual teams have their advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, because team members come from different countries with different knowledge and points of view, they may develop creative ideas and solutions to problems that work for multiple cultures. On the negative side, global virtual teams face more challenges than traditional teams that meet face-to-face. For one thing, miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings, which can create stress and conflict among team members. Also, members who do not accept individuals from different cultures may hesitate to share information openly, creating problems of trust.

To create and implement effective global virtual teams, managers must carefully select employees who they believe will thrive in such an environment. Employees must be comfortable with communicating electronically with others, and they must be open to different ideas. When dealing with team members in other countries, speaking multiple languages may also be necessary. Team members also must realize that the values they hold may be vastly different from their teammates' values. For instance, an individual from a country that values relationships and sensitivity, such as Sweden, might face a challenge when interacting with someone from Spain, which values assertiveness and competitiveness.

Though there are many challenges facing global virtual teams, companies that implement them effectively can realize tremendous rewards through the diverse knowledge they gain.

Source: Based on N. Zakaria, A. Amelinckx, and D. Wilemon, "Working Together Apart? Building a Knowledge-Sharing Culture for Global Virtual Teams," *Creativity and Innovation Management*, March 2004, pp 15–29.

Class Exercise

1. Ask student to read:
http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Managing_Groups_and_Teams/How_Do_You_Manage_Global_Virtual_Teams%3F
2. Assign groups of three to five students to create a plan for a multinational organization to expand into an Eastern European country (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, etc).
3. The groups' first step should be to create a virtual team to develop the expansion plans.

4. They could use resources such as the CIA Factbook
https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/region/region_eur.html
and WIKI (example, Poland <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poland>)
5. Students should identify cultural differences between the U.S. and the selected country. Other differences should be noted such as work environments, and other issues identified in the WIKI paper in question 1.
6. Students should give some thought as to how they would identify a company or individuals in the target country. For an example resource, see http://www.buyusa.gov/poland/en/doing_business_in_poland1.html.
7. The students should complete a presentation to the class that details:
 - a. What are the potential markets like in target countries?
 - b. What are the cultural differences that could lead to difficulties in working with a planning team in the target country?
 - c. How will the selection process of virtual team members in the target country proceed?
 - d. What is the assessment of probability or success in the expansion?

An Ethical Choice

Preventing Team Mistakes

Surgery is almost always performed by a team, but in many cases it's a team in name only. So says a new study of more than 2,100 surgeons, anesthesiologists, and nurses.

Researchers asked the respondents to “describe the quality of communication and collaboration you have experienced” with other members of the surgical unit. Perhaps not surprisingly, surgeons were given the lowest ratings for teamwork and nurses the highest. “The study is somewhat humbling to me,” said Martin Makary, the lead author on the study and a surgeon at Johns Hopkins. “There’s a lot of pride in the surgical community. We need to balance out the captain-of-the-ship doctrine.”

The researchers attribute many operating room errors, such as sponges left in patients and operations performed on the wrong part of the body, to poor teamwork. But improving the system is easier said than done. One recent study in Pennsylvania found that, over an 18-month period, there were 174 cases of surgeons operating on the wrong limb or body part. Johns Hopkins is modeling surgical team training after airline crew training. “Teamwork is an important component of patient safety,” says Makary.

Tell that to a patient at Rhode Island Hospital. In 2009, a surgeon operated on the wrong side of a child’s mouth. No one on the surgical team bothered to check the surgeon’s mark. What’s especially discouraging about the case is that it appears the surgical team followed existing protocols, including a time-out in which all members agreed the surgery should take place on the right side of the mouth (when in fact it should have been the left). The error was the fourth wrong-site surgery at Rhode Island Hospital since 2007.

These cases are hardly unusual. One study of British surgical teams revealed errors in 40 percent of cases. In 2009, a surgical team at Atlanta’s Northside Hospital performed a double mastectomy when only one breast was to be removed. At Atlanta Medical Center, a surgical team mistakenly drilled into the wrong side of a patient’s head.

Assuming you aren’t headed for a career as a surgical team member, what can this research tell you about your individual ethical responsibilities as a team member?

1. Recognize that the pressure to be a good team player and the diffusion of responsibility often lead us to question too little and assume someone else will catch any error. Yes, by questioning, you run the risk of being labeled as “not a team player,” but if you accept errors or marginal performance, the outcomes may reflect negatively on your career.
2. Realize all members of teams are not created equal. A surgeon in the operating room and a pilot in the cockpit tend to dominate teams. That makes it all the more important that you question their decision making, taking care to be respectful and civil in so doing.

3. If you have a say in the composition of the team, aim for diversity. As we noted in Chapter 2, some evidence suggests diverse teams are less prone to groupthink.

Sources: A. Young, "Medical Mistakes Unhappy Reality," The Atlanta Journal- Constitution (May 03, 2009), www.ajc.com; F. J. Freyer, "R.I. Hospital Says Marking Wasn't Verified in Wrong-Site Surgery," The Providence Journal (June 13, 2009), www.projo.com; E. Nagourney, "Surgical Teams Found Lacking in Teamwork," New York Times (May 9, 2006), p. D6; and "Nurses Give Surgeons Poor Grades on Teamwork in OR," Forbes (May 5, 2006), www.forbes.com.

Class Exercise

1. An optional suggestion about preventing groupthink may be found at <http://www.wikihow.com/Prevent-Groupthink>.
2. Ask students to read this view.
3. Ask students to discuss how they could shoulder the ethical responsibility of ensuring groupthink does not lead to bad decisions or bad actions.
4. They should include discussion about accepting the role of leadership to question actions that seem inappropriate. The discussion might include overcoming the natural tendency of subordinates to stay quiet to preserve their anonymity.

Myth or Science? Old Teams Can Learn New Tricks

This statement is true for some types of teams and false for others. Let's look at why.

To study this question, researchers at Michigan State University composed 80 four-person teams from undergraduate business students. The teams engaged in a networked computer simulation that was developed for the Department of Defense. In the simulation, teams played a command-and-control simulation in which each team member sat at a networked computer connected to his or her other team members' computers. The team's mission was to monitor a geographic area, keep unfriendly forces from moving in, and support friendly forces. Performance was measured by both speed (how quickly they identified targets and friendly forces) and accuracy (the number of friendly-fire errors and missed opportunities).

Teams were rewarded either cooperatively (in which case team members shared rewards equally) or competitively (in which case team members were rewarded based on their individual contributions). After playing a few rounds, the reward structures were switched, so that the cooperatively rewarded teams were switched to competitive rewards and the competitively rewarded teams were now cooperatively rewarded.

The researchers found that the initially cooperatively rewarded teams easily adapted to the competitive reward conditions and learned to excel. However, the formerly competitively rewarded teams could not adapt to cooperative rewards. As the authors note, their results may shed light on the intelligence failures of the CIA and FBI; when these formerly separate organizations were asked to cooperate, they found it very difficult to do so.

If the results of this study generalize to actual teams, it seems that teams that "cut their teeth" being cooperative can learn to be competitive, but competitive teams find it much harder to learn to cooperate.

Source: M. D. Johnson, S. E. Humphrey, D. R. Ilgen, D. Jundt, and C. J. Meyer, "Cutthroat Cooperation: Asymmetrical Adaptation to Changes in Team Reward Structures," *Academy of Management Journal* 49, vol. 1 (2006), pp. 103-119.

Class Exercise

1. Ask students to recall group activities in previous courses.
2. Were the activities successful? Do students have good feelings about the group work?
3. Can they recall how the instructor defined incentives for the group's outcome?
4. How would they describe the productivity based on the incentive?

Point/CounterPoint

Sports Teams Are Good Models for Work Teams

Point

Studies from football, soccer, basketball, hockey, and baseball have found a number of elements of successful sports teams that can be extrapolated to successful work teams.

Goals foster team cohesion. A study of basketball teams found that while those that set team goals and those that did not had similar levels of cohesion when the season began, those with goals were more cohesive at the end of the season.

Successful teams score early wins. Early successes build teammates' faith in themselves and their capacity as a team. Research on hockey teams of relatively equal ability found that 72 percent of the time, the team leading at the end of the first period went on to win. So managers should provide teams with early tasks that are simple and provide "easy wins."

Successful teams avoid losing streaks. A couple of failures can lead to a downward spiral if a team becomes demoralized. Managers need to instill the confidence in team members that they can turn things around when they encounter setbacks.

Practice makes perfect. Successful sport teams execute on game day but learn from their mistakes in practice. Practice should be used to try new things and fail. A wise manager encourages work teams to experiment and learn.

Successful teams use halftime breaks. The best coaches in basketball and football use halftime during a game to reassess what is working and what isn't. Managers of work teams should similarly build in assessments at the approximate halfway point in a team project to evaluate what it can do to improve.

Being slightly behind can be motivating. A recent study of 6,572 NCAA basketball games revealed that the team slightly behind at halftime won more games than it lost. Teams that are slightly ahead may suffer from "victory disease" by relaxing and trying not to lose, whereas those slightly behind may be more motivated.

Winning teams have stable membership. Stability improves performance. Studies of professional basketball teams found that when teammates have more time together they can better anticipate one another's moves, and they are clearer about one another's roles.

CounterPoint

There are flaws in using sports as a model for developing effective work teams. Here are five caveats.

All sport teams aren't alike. In baseball, for instance, there is little interaction among teammates. Rarely are more than two or three players directly involved in a play. The performance of the team is largely the sum of the performance of its individual players. In contrast, basketball has much more interdependence among players: team members are densely clustered and must switch from offense to defense at a moment's notice. The performance of this team is more than the sum of its individual players. So when using sports teams as a model for work teams, you have to make sure you're making the correct comparison. As one expert noted, "The problem with sports metaphors is that the meaning you extract from a sports metaphor is entirely dependent on the sport you pick."

Work teams are more varied and complex than sports teams. In an athletic league, the design of the task, the design of the team, and the team's context vary relatively little from team to team. But these variables can vary tremendously between work teams. As a result, coaching plays a much more significant part in a sports team's performance than in that of a work team. Performance of work teams is a function of getting the team's structural and design variables right. Managers of work teams should focus more on getting the team set up for success than on coaching.

A lot of employees can't relate to sports metaphors. Not everyone on work teams is interested in sports or savvy about sports terminology. And team members from different cultures may not know the sports metaphors you're using. Most U.S. workers, for instance, are unfamiliar with the rules and terminology of Australian Rules football.

Work team outcomes aren't easily defined in terms of wins and losses. Sports teams typically measure success in terms of wins and losses. Success is rarely as clear or black and white for work teams.

Sports team metaphors oversimplify. Sports team metaphors simplify a complicated world. While such shortcuts hold an intuitive appeal, we also have to recognize they serve as "mind funnels"—rather than expanding our minds to the full range of possibilities, sports metaphors reduce and simplify—not something to recommend to the enlightened manager.

Class Exercise

This is another good topic for a class debate.

1. You can use the format for the debate from Chapter 1, or use a more formal format.
2. Before this debate, assign students to research this topic in greater depth.
3. Divide the class in half, each half researching their side of the team debate.
4. An informal debate structure is to read Point/Counterpoint as a starting point, and then have the two halves of the class debate the topic.