Cross-cultural virtual teams are on the rise, but can they communicate effectively?

There are many benefits resulting from cross-cultural virtual teams. For instance, companies take advantage of the incorporation of talented individuals from around the globe. Communicating virtually represents a more cost-effective way to exchange information, since it reduces the time and costs associated with traveling and arranging face-to-face meetings. Most important of all, the cultural diversity and widespread distribution of individuals help to form heterogeneous teams with varying perspectives. When managed appropriately, these different perspectives enable highly creative and innovative teamwork and increase the potential of the team to perform well, especially when working on complex problems.

However, the diversity of cross-cultural virtual teams also poses a lot of challenges. Cultural differences can create additional barriers to successful communication. For example, cultural values influence the way people interpret information and how they make decisions (Lonner, Berry and Hofstede 1980). This can increase the potential for misunderstandings, particularly when primarily using digital means to exchange information, where a lot of information that is important for successful communication (e.g. non-verbal and para-verbal communication) is invisible (Lonner, Berry and Hofstede 1980).

To overcome these challenges and unleash the greatest potential from your next cross-cultural team meeting, here are five simple steps that help to improve your virtual team communication:

Establish and maintain trust

Because of the lack of physical interactions and the potentially high cultural distance among team members, it is important for virtual teams to deliberately establish and maintain a good level of trust. In virtual teams, trust is built through reliability, consistency, and mutuality. Team members should be consistent with their words and action, treat each other with respect, and act in the best interest of the team. Team leaders should make sure that online meetings start and deliver as promised, ensure that everyone is involved equally when working from distributed locations, and communicate tasks and responsibilities clearly (recommendations from Kirkman, et al. 2002).

Harness the best communication tool and style

Cross-cultural virtual team leaders should match the communication tool with their style of communication and allow enough time for everyone to become familiar with it. Communication in a virtual environment is often less frequent, less rich, and thus more challenging. This is because contextual cues such as body language, gestures, and tone, which play an important role in face-to-face communication, are difficult to transmit. Teams in which members have low language commonality (e.g. everybody is able to speak English, but some team members have strong accents, which makes it more difficult to understand their verbal communication) should choose a lean medium such as e-mail to increase the effectiveness of their communication (Klitmøller, Anders, and Jakob Lauring. 2013). In contrast, teams with a high degree of cultural difference (e.g. differing manifestations of cultural values such as power distance or gender egalitarianism) should choose a rich medium such as videoconference when sharing complex messages. In addition, research (DeSanctis, Wright and Jiang 2001.) also found that higher performing teams preferred fewer, deeper conversations to more frequent, shallow conversations. This shows that choosing the appropriate communication infrastructure for the given context is an important enabler for cross-cultural virtual team communication and performance.

Understand and leverage team diversity

Since the cultural diversity in cross-cultural virtual teams is its greatest asset as well as liability, it is imperative that the existing diversity is well understood and managed. One way to recognise each individual's diversity is to set up an expertise directory and skills matrix. Asynchronous collaboration such as discussion threads or document annotation represent other ways to harness diversity in teams (methods suggested by Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen 2007). This would allow individuals with diverse working patterns or different language capabilities to digest and contribute ideas based on their own preferences. By embracing its diversity, cross-cultural virtual teams can become more effective at decision making and idea-generation.

Create virtual work-cycle and meetings

To structure an effective meeting, team leaders should clearly communicate the meeting's agenda and goals beforehand. At the start of meetings, there is a chance for members to reconnect and build social relationships. During meetings, team leaders should ensure that everyone is engaged and heard from. At the end of meetings, action items and results of discussions should be posted immediately (methods suggested by Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen 2007).

Ensure external assessment and recognition of the team

Assessing and recognising team members that are physically out of sight is difficult. This is even more true, when a team is also culturally diverse (conclusion of Scott and Wildman 2015). To do so, team leaders can use balanced scorecards that measure performance indicators of individuals (methods suggested by Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen 2007). The goal is to monitor closely and represent the virtual work progress of team members so that they receive the recognition they deserve. Further, team members can spontaneously recognise each other's great work through virtual reward systems such as giving stars or positive comments to your colleagues or using emojis that might be an integral part of the meeting software.

The trend towards a mobile, collaborative, and intercultural work environment is speeding up, as said above, also due to the social distancing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – so next time when you find yourself in a cross-cultural virtual team, you can try focusing on these five principles and incorporate them into your work routines in order to improve collaboration and performance.

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Notes:

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