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Leading collaboration in global teams

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

Leading global teams has become a critical factor for success in today's workplaces. These teams, which are often virtual, are characterized by their diversity, digital nature and dispersion. Compared to co-located teamwork, global teamwork presents many additional job demands and resources that team leaders need to take into consideration. This chapter introduces the specific characteristics of global teams that are likely to affect members' work engagement and performance. Therefore, the ability to engage others in global collaboration is a fundamental leadership competency. This chapter also presents concrete measures and tools for leading global teams. They include, for example, the strategic use of communication media, the creation of psychological safety and trust between team members and the use of inclusive language. In this way, global teamwork can be turned into an opportunity for learning and innovation rather than a source of friction and conflict.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand critical aspects in leading global teams.
- Recognize the role of employee engagement in leading others.
- Explore the specificities of virtual collaboration.
- Propose strategies to bridge boundaries in global collaboration.
- Understand the role of language in global collaboration.

CASE STUDY 3 ALEX LEADING A GLOBAL TEAM

KONE Corporation is a century-old global elevator and escalator company. Alex,[1] the Head of New Product Development and team leader at headquarters in Espoo (Finland), has set up a virtual meeting with the team members in Germany, the US, India and China. This team is working on an advanced IT solution for a global customer. "I wonder why Camilla from Hannover (Germany) and Sharon from Coal Valley (the US) have been repeatedly unavailable to attend our meetings?" Alex mumbles. However, the time difference between the team members' locations makes things very hard to coordinate. "Good morning, Camilla, how are things in Hannover?" Alex asks and tries to find out more about her as a new team member. "Will you be able to produce the R&D figures for our meeting with the product development team on Thursday evening?" Camilla is usually cheerful and positive, but Alex can hear concern in her voice. "Thank you for your call, Alex Mattila. Unfortunately, I cannot attend the meeting this week either as my father is in cancer care," she says with a trembling voice.

While Alex is speaking to Camilla, a message arrives from Sharon making a cynical comment about her workload. Alex has never met Sharon either despite frequent calls and meetings during the past few months. Sharon has been recruited from one of the company's key competitors in the tech industry. She is a celebrated sales manager in the community who has a great track record, but lately there have been rumors about her being completely overworked. Sharon has a major responsibility in the project and works highly autonomously, making it difficult for Alex to replace her. In the last meeting Anoop from Chennai (India) complained that "it is hard to get all the necessary information from Sharon" for delivering his part of the project. Sharon speaks English with a broad southern American accent, causing confusion and misunderstanding in the team, especially for Yian from Kunshan (China). Yian always joins the team meetings from his office rather than from home where he does not have access to the necessary technology and security. In the previous meeting he lamented: "I cannot follow the discussion. Would it be possible to receive the changes required by the US salespeople in writing, please?"

Alex realizes that Camilla's father's recovery might take a long time and Sharon being overly stressed also raises questions about whether Anoop and Yian will have the necessary data to complete the project at the scheduled deadline. Alex already struggles to keep up with the demands placed by the executive board that wants to see a closer fit between these kinds of digital projects and the business goals. "How will I be able to meet all these different expectations and needs? What should I prioritize? And how do I get my team to finalize this sophisticated IT solution our global customer so urgently needs?" Alex is wondering.

INTRODUCTION

Much of today's knowledge work in multinational corporations takes place in global teams. A key characteristic of these teams is diversity that brings together people with different educational qualifications, experience, language skills and cultural backgrounds. Like in our opening

example, members of the team may represent a variety of functions such as sales and R&D. They may also be employed by partner organizations across global value chains. Cultural diversity tends to affect team processes and outcomes differently than other types of diversity. This is because cultural differences often operate at a subconscious level and thus some of their effects are not recognized or may be misattributed.[2] At the same time, cultural differences are a common source of categorization and stereotyping at the workplace. They tend to get the blame when things do not go according to plan, even when this is not the true cause.

Due to the technological advances and the global reach of multinationals, virtual collaboration in global teams has become the norm. A global virtual team such as the one led by Alex consists of people who are located in different countries and who collaborate via information and communication technologies (ICTs) to achieve a common goal. They have also been characterized as 4-D teams because they are Diverse, Digital, Dynamic and Dispersed.[3] While global teams have several advantages such as providing synergy, creativity and learning, the virtual nature of teamwork also presents challenges. These include, for example, how to synchronize teamwork, how to build strong relationships between team members and how to create mutual understanding among them. These challenges stem from several tensions that are inherent in any global virtual teamwork such as connectivity vs. isolation, high autonomy vs. control, and engagement vs. exhaustion.[4] In global teams, the ideal worker is often expected to be fully dedicated and available 24/7 regardless of family or personal needs, which may lead to exhaustion rather than engagement. When such individuals are promoted, receive higher pay and gain power in the organization, this image of the ideal worker is further enhanced. As in our opening example, Alex was struggling with these tensions when trying to come up with the best way to lead the team across distance and time zones. In other words, diversity presents a "double-edged sword" for global teams: it can be both a source of friction and conflict and, hence, an obstacle to effective team performance as well as a source of learning and innovation. Whether diversity has a negative or positive effect on team performance depends on many factors such as tenure of team members, complexity of the task, fluency of the members in the chosen working language of the team and above all on global leadership skills, which is our focus.

Thus, in this chapter, we emphasize the role of collaborative skills and tools in leading others towards a common goal and reaping the benefits of diversity. Team leaders need to have the skills to span multiple boundaries such as organizational, professional, linguistic and knowledge boundaries when working across distance and time zones. A key skill for global leaders is the ability to engage team members in collaboration without having the requisite hierarchical power to do so.

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND GLOBAL COLLABORATION

Scholars and practitioners have raised concerns about employees' decreasing work engagement. This has been identified as one of the most alarming global economic problems.[5] Work engagement is a key predictor of employee creativity, task performance, organizational citizenship behavior and client satisfaction.[6] Therefore, understanding the concept of work engagement, its meaning for employees and implications for employers is important for global leaders.

Work engagement is defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption."[7] Engaged employees are emotionally connected to their work, which leads them to invest more effort in work than is formally expected, and often perform better than non engaged employees.[8] They also tend to help their colleagues when needed, show organizational commitment, and stay healthy in stressful environments.[9] Fostering team members' high work engagement is particularly relevant in global virtual teams, where employees work across long distances and rarely meet each other in person. Technology dependency in communication further reduces social interactions and social support, which may decrease work engagement and increase burnout risk.[10]

In order to better understand what may lead to work engagement or to burnout,[11] we will take a closer look at two work characteristics, namely, job demands and job resources.[12] **Job demands** are physical, organizational, social or psychological aspects of the job that require a sustained effort and use of energy reserves by employees.[13] These demands may influence employee well-being negatively and increase the risk of burnout. **Job resources**, on the other hand, are social, organizational or task-related aspects of work that stimulate personal growth, learning and development as well as attainment of work goals, and therefore have the potential to promote well-being and engagement at work. Job demands and job resources are not independent but affect each other. Job resources may, for example, help in managing stressful demands of global teamwork (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Job demands and job resources in global teams

Global Team Characteristics	Job Demands	Job Resources
Geographic Distance	• Coordination challenges • Ambiguity in roles • Goal conflicts • Communication problems • Process delays • Uncertainty and ambiguity • Loneliness and isolation	• Virtual team-building activities • Clear role definitions and documentation • Regular update meetings • Use of collaboration software • Periodic in-person meetings and site visits to build better team familiarity and cohesion
Time Differences	• Reduced time for synchronous interaction • Scheduling difficulties • Work–life balance stress	• Implement "Follow the Sun" or "Round-the-Clock" models for continuous work cycles • Scheduled rotating meeting times to accommodate all time zones • Use of asynchronous communication tools like email and discussion forums

Global Team Characteristics	Job Demands	Job Resources
Technology Dependence	• Misunderstandings and conflict escalation • Reduced informal communication • Increased workload and work hours	• Choice of appropriate communication tools based on task requirements (rich media for complex tasks, lean media for simple tasks) • Use of escalation protocols for conflict resolution • Time management and workload balancing tools
Cultural and Language Diversity	• Misinterpretations due to cultural differences • Communication barriers • Decreased shared understanding	• Cross-cultural training programs • Use of a common working language • Creation of a team glossary for commonly used terms and phrases • Diverse team-building activities to appreciate different cultures
Mobility and Business Travel	• Stress due to constant changes in location • Difficulty in managing non-work responsibilities • Long working hours	• Flexible work arrangements • Travel policies that consider employee well-being • Use of local hubs to minimize travel requirements • Support systems for managing home responsibilities while traveling

Geographic distance. A central aspect of Alex's leadership situation is the physical dispersion of all the team members. The project delays are caused by communication problems and coordination challenges. The team suffers from uncertainty and ambiguity because they lack insight into teammates' local reality; this makes it difficult to reach a shared understanding of the project's goals and the roles of each team member.

Although the opportunity to collaborate with and learn from global experts tends to increase work engagement and innovativeness among global professionals,[14] geographical distance poses demands on reaping the benefits of virtual global collaboration. Research shows that remote team members may suffer from psychological symptoms such as feelings of loneliness[15] and social and professional isolation.[16] This may decrease their engagement and performance over extended periods of time and manifest as absenteeism and free-riding.

Time differences. The members of Alex's team are scattered from East to West and they could leverage time to their advantage by crossing time zones and being productive over more than one work cycle. But conversely, time differences reduce the time available for synchronous interaction, as Alex painfully discovers. Scheduled conference calls always require someone to attend meetings outside his or her normal workday. For example, Yian from China has to spend late hours in the office because for security issues he cannot join the meeting from home. Global team members have often been observed to work after hours to accommodate other members' work schedules, which in turn tends to increase the perceived conflict between work and social life.[17]

Technology dependence in communication. When global team members are physically distant, technology is required to mediate the communication. While synchronous communication media allow for real-time collaboration, asynchronous media do not, enabling partici-

pants to use it independently at different times.[18] Technology for synchronous communication includes online chat, telephone, video conferencing tools, and other types of awareness technology tools. Asynchronous communication tools include email, text messaging, documentation, virtual collaboration spaces and discussion forums.

Alex understands that a conference call would be the most effective means to coordinate the more fuzzy and difficult issues of the project whereas emails are used to clarify details and particularly allow non-English speakers in the team sufficient time to think and respond. Moreover, Chinese workers don't use emails as much as Europeans, for example, but rely on WeChat.

There are numerous studies showing that electronic dependence creates special challenges for completing joint tasks, such as misunderstandings and conflict escalation,[19] reduced informal or spontaneous communication, lower shared understanding and limited social cohesion.[20] Technology-mediated communication has been also observed to harm well-being at work. For example, email tends to create additional work and lengthen workdays.[21]

Cultural and language diversity. Ways of thinking, feeling and behaving vary between cultures making collaboration and communication difficult in global teams.[22] Although Alex's team uses English as a common language, team members might still think in their native tongue.[23] In this regard, interactions in global teams are almost always multilingual and multicultural, affecting how trust-based relationships are formed,[24] how problems get framed and decisions get made.[25] Embracing cultural sensitivity and awareness[26] helps create a sense of belonging among team members, which has a positive impact on employee engagement.[27]

Mobility and business travel. Mobility is an essential part of many functions in international firms such as marketing and sales and technical support. Frequent business travel causes stress due to constant changes in location, new daily routines to which employees must adjust[28] and reduced ability to manage non-work responsibilities, particularly for women who are primary caregivers.[29] For example, traveling salespeople generally suffer from long working hours, too many customers and high perceived psychological demands.[30] Women may also feel added pressure to prove their competence and professionalism, especially in male-dominated industries or roles, which can make business interactions more stressful. For example, networking events are often designed with male norms in mind (e.g., golf outings, bar visits), which can make women feel excluded or uncomfortable.

While business travelers have been found to file medical claims at a rate three times greater than non-travelers,[31] there is limited evidence of any association between poor mental health and the number of working hours away from the firm or nights away from home.[32] The overall work satisfaction among mobile workers has been shown to be slightly higher than among non-mobile workers.[33] Interesting jobs often require mobility, leading to higher satisfaction among professionals and managers as well as among the self-employed. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns for sustainability and climate change have considerably restricted mobility and business travel.

LEADING GLOBAL COLLABORATION

In the previous section we established that global teamwork includes many additional job demands compared to co-located teamwork that may affect team members' work engagement and performance. In this section, we illustrate measures and tools Alex could use to engage team members and offer opportunities and conditions for developing cohesion in the team. One of them is the strategic use of different communication media, which we turn to first.

Using Communication Media Strategically

Frequent technology-mediated communication and occasional face-to-face meetings are particularly effective for building cohesion and positive relationships in global teams.[34] Global teams tend to work better when members first get to know one another in person and maintain their relationships through frequent virtual communication. When team members know each other personally, they give their colleagues the benefit of the doubt, pick up the phone when issues arise and are generally more effective at collaborating. But given the increasing travel restrictions and the carbon footprint associated with global travel, organizing face-to-face meetings is not always feasible. Therefore, when global workers travel to the location of their distant collaborators, they should be given sufficient freedom to spend time together and work side-by-side to learn about each other's personalities and approach to work. Such site visits are shown to improve collaboration and engagement in global teams.[35]

While face-to-face meetings may be most effective for building cohesion and engagement, virtual modes of communication can be used for maintaining relationships and engagement in global teams. Leaders can improve effective knowledge transfer, mutual understanding and overall team performance by matching media characteristics with the team's needs. Alex, for example, sets up video conferencing to communicate more quickly and allow for immediate feedback. In global teams that cross multiple time zones, leaders can also encourage the use of asynchronous communication for sharing information that others can read at the time they prefer.[36]

In innovative teamwork, asynchronous communication can also help managing information overload, which sometimes happens in synchronous meetings where only one person can speak at a time and other members might forget their ideas or these may be overlooked because they don't fit the context anymore.[37] Asynchronous communication enables team members to write ideas down in a shared space, for example, on a virtual white board. It also allows for cognitive absence (i.e., being present physically but not mentally) that can reduce information overload when the information received is considered overwhelming and exceeds one's capacity to process it. When using asynchronous media, which allows for digesting feedback at one's own pace, ideas and critiques can be received without the fear of being rejected or seeming inadequate. This medium also favors non-native speakers of English with limited language proficiency.[38]

However, the problem with asynchronous communication is that the messages easily escalate.[39] For example, when the work tasks are complex, team members should plan for

a synchronous meeting to reach common understanding rather than wasting hours and hours trying to explain complex subjects by email.[40] To avoid such situations, managers can introduce escalation protocols that provide guidelines for reaching the right person with the right medium (asynchronous or synchronous) at the right time. Status reporting also helps keep all members aware of task flow and avoids coordination mistakes. This is important as coordination mistakes can easily escalate causing considerable coordination costs, such as overlapping work, unfinished tasks and delays. Furthermore, technology can be used to indicate when remote workers are available and what they are working on and in which site. Figure 3.1 summarizes the different characteristics of communication media based on richness vs. synchronicity.

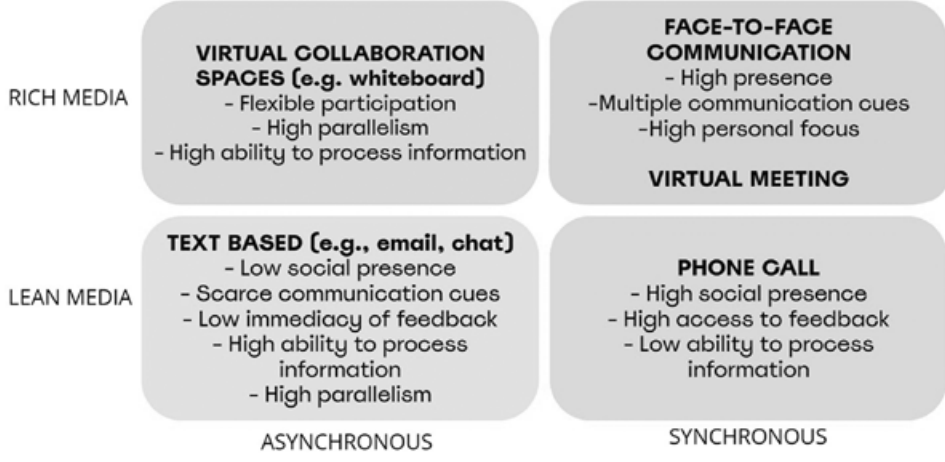


Figure 3.1 Lean vs. rich and asynchronous vs. synchronous communication media

Global teams can also take advantage of time differences if they are utilized strategically as described in the following two work methods.

FOLLOW THE SUN AND ROUND-THE-CLOCK

The work method of "Follow the Sun" is typically used in East–West configured teams to decrease the turnaround of global projects, so that at the end of each workday a worker located in the East hands over a task to another team member who is starting his or her workday in a Western time zone. This work method has the potential to speed up the time-to-market of a product.[41] Teams that have no overlapping working time can also predetermine the exact communication times to facilitate coordination.

"Round-the-Clock" is another method of using time differences beneficially at a team level. Whereas Follow the Sun is about increasing the speed of a project, Round-the-Clock is about having 24-hour coverage.[42] Typically, Round-the-Clock is used by global call

centers and other service providers to serve customers around the globe while the workers are always working in daytime.

While Follow the Sun is typically used in projects that have ongoing processes at different temporally separated team sites, Round-the-Clock tasks are specific and short such as brief client queries in global tech support and require minimal handovers between workers.

Create Psychological Safety and Trust

Psychological safety is the term commonly used to describe an optimal work environment where team members feel confident and relaxed enough to voice ideas, speak their minds freely, seek honest feedback and willingly give it.[43] Such an environment is never a given: it is delicate and dynamic and requires commitment and constant attention. Leaders can foster psychologically safe environments by making sure team members feel included and have the space to challenge prevailing assumptions and voice disagreement, for instance, regarding the team's progress.[44]

WHAT MAKES A TEAM EFFECTIVE AT GOOGLE?

"What makes a team effective at Google?" To answer this question the tech giant conducted a two-year study on team performance. They analyzed hundreds of Google's teams to figure out why some staggered while others soared. No matter how the researchers arranged the data, though, it was almost impossible to find patterns – or any evidence that the composition of a team made any difference. The results pointed to some behaviors that seemed important – like making sure a team had clear goals and having a sense of work purpose. However, sometimes the behaviors of one effective team contrasted sharply with those of another equally successful group. Was it better to let everyone speak as much as they wanted, or should strong leaders end meandering debates? Was it more effective for people to openly disagree with one another, or should conflicts be played down? The data didn't offer clear verdicts. Yet, the research revealed one phenomenon that the highest-performing teams had in common: psychological safety and the building of trust between team members.

Source: Duhigg (2016).

Team leaders should hone the skill of asking questions that allow diverse views and needs to be articulated. Asking the right questions is considered one of the hallmarks of any good manager, yet how and when questions are asked can send unintended signals about competence and power.[45] Cultural context and personality also play a role in whether and when people ask questions, so leaders should nurture their ability to listen carefully. Active listening helps to gain a deeper understanding of issues and situations and thereby fosters a psychologically safe environment. Active listening does not mean automatic agreement but stimulating better understanding of others' perspectives before responding.[46] This means, for example, avoiding a mindset where the question is asked only to trigger an already prepared reply. In the opening case, Alex notices that Camilla's voice is trembling when she talks about her father's

difficult condition. Generally, four categories to describe people's approaches to listening are distinguished.[47]

Relational listeners are sympathetic and empathetic; they naturally connect with feelings and emotions of their interlocutors. **Analytical listeners** pay attention to the facts, content and validity; they want to make a fully formed decision. **Critical listeners** pick up mistakes or inconsistencies; they question the accuracy of what they are hearing. Whereas **task-oriented listeners** want the outcome rather than the communication; they are inpatient with those who take longer to express themselves.

As shown in Table 3.2, active listening as a tool makes use of certain techniques. In culturally complex, global work settings of course, one shouldn't assume one ever fully understands team members' intentions. Therefore, it is essential to frequently and continuously check the accuracy of understanding in order to keep distortion and misunderstandings to a minimum.[48]

Table 3.2 Active listening techniques

Techniques to Stimulate Active Listening	Example
Paraphrasing to convey interest and encourage someone to keep talking. Restate the information just received in your own words.	*I am hearing you … so you believe more should be done in our team?*
Asking to get more information and further responses. Ask (open-ended) questions.	*Was this a helpful contribution?*
Summarizing to review progress and establish a basis for further discussion. Restate major ideas expressed, including feelings.	*These seem to be the key ideas you've expressed:*
Clarifying what has been said, to see other points of view. Restate unclear interpretations to elicit further explanations.	*What I meant was …*
Encouraging to convey interest, and to keep them talking. Use varying intonations, give verbal cues, offer ideas and suggestions.	*Oh really! So maybe we could do that first …*
Verbalizing emotions to show that one understands, help the other person to evaluate their own feelings. Reflect the speaker's basic feelings and emotions in words.	*So, you must be upset about that …*
Balancing active listening and assertive speaking. Withhold judgments and advice. Pay attention to body language.	*The material would appear to cover the first half of the course.*

Source: Adapted from Bauer and Figl (2008).

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

What is your approach to listening? Which category best describes your own approach to listening? How far do you consciously adapt or accommodate your listening style to the preferences of those you are communicating with? What are the techniques you usually use to convey that you are seeing things from his or her point of view?

The skill of active listening is related to giving and receiving feedback. Numerous studies show that employees who receive constructive, developmental and timely feedback feel more personally committed to their work. In providing such feedback, global leaders should be mindful that feedback is given and received within a cultural, generational and personal context which may vary significantly from one team member to another. What is seen as a clear and

constructive response in one culture may be seen as rude and insensitive, or conversely, insufficiently precise, in another. Some team members, who are used to instant responses in the age of social media, may expect reassurance with uncomfortable frequency that they are carrying out the project in the right way. Others will work better if they feel their team leader trusts them, communicates more sparingly and lets them get on with the job. Giving meaningful feedback is one of the most important responsibilities of any team leader, and results will be best when feedback, as far as possible, is tailored intelligently, sensitively and flexibly to take the individual experience and expectations of each team member into account.

HOW TO GIVE NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

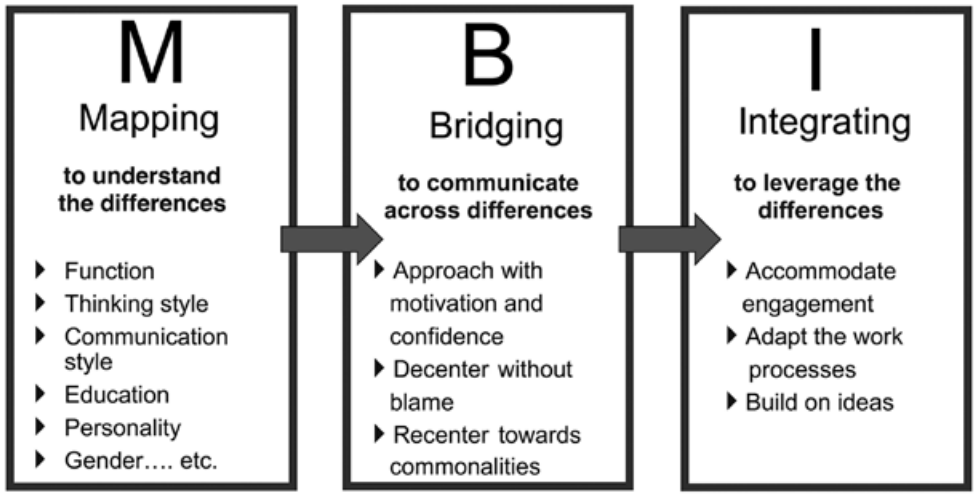
Consider the divergent cultural, personal or generational expectations of the members of your team when giving or receiving feedback. How would you personally give negative feedback to your team member(s). Imagine the situation and formulate the exact words you would use. Do you expect to find your own cultural background helpful or a hindrance?

Next to active listening and feedback, basing a collaboration on trust is an important building block of psychologically safe environments. Trust can be defined as the assumption that one can rely on another person's actions and words and that the other genuinely intends to carry out their promises.[49] A further dimension of trust is readiness to reveal failure or show vulnerability. Trust is fundamental to any truly productive relationship. However, as the Alex case shows, trust seems to be even more essential in global teams, where supervision and direct interactions are much more limited. Trust is also more fragile in diverse teams, because their members have different cultural experiences, build trust in different ways and use different criteria to assess trust.[50]

Map, Bridge and Integrate

Mapping-Bridging-Integrating (MBI) is a leadership tool to develop and sustain high performance in global teams.[51] The MBI model (Figure 3.2) has gained wide acceptance in business and management training for its simplicity and adaptability to different contexts. The model consists of three critical phases within global team processes that must work together: according to DiStefano and Maznevski, good bridging almost always leads to good integration. Bridging, in turn, rests on good mapping. Each phase consists of a set of skills that can be practiced and learned over time:

(1) Mapping is the skill of describing the relevant differences (and similarities) without making judgments and understanding the impact on key aspects of the team situation.
(2) Bridging is the skill of communicating across the differences to bring people and ideas together and prevent miscommunication.
(3) Integrating comprises the skill of ensuring that team members can leverage their differences and come up with new and adapted forms of action to achieve objectives.



Source: Adapted from DiStefano and Maznevski (2000).

Figure 3.2 The MBI model

By systematically **mapping** the characteristics of Camilla, Sharon, Anoop and Yian, Alex would raise the shared awareness of existing differences and similarities. Some people are reluctant to describe differences out of fear of stereotyping; but rather than judgmental categorization, mapping is about understanding how people's diverse orientations affect the team. For example, what are the preferred communication styles and what impact does this have on the more introverted personalities in the team? Or how do different thinking styles affect the workflow? Bringing the different perspectives and potential contributions into the team discussion would help Alex to prevent conflicts and help them to see opportunities.

Bridging is about communicating effectively by taking the observed differences into account and by acknowledging, for example, the multilingual nature of global teamwork. In this phase, the above-mentioned skills of active listening and feedback are important as well as cultural perspective-taking. Alex can further improve on the capacity to be empathetic and take the perspective of each team member into account. The success of global team collaboration depends to a great extent on the ability to make sense of other people's viewpoints.

Finally, **integrating** is about bringing the different perspectives together and building on them to come up with new and innovative solutions.[52] This involves three essential skills: empowering participation, resolving conflicts and combining ideas. Alex should align the work process to accommodate, for example, different cultural norms in dealing with conflicts. Alex could also vary communication channels and modes to support the active participation of each team member.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN GLOBAL COLLABORATION

Communication is the heart of team collaboration, and language is an important part of communication. Language is often the first immediate barrier to collaboration across cultures, and most international firms choose English as lingua franca to create a shared communication base. However corporate leaders usually do not spend a lot of time thinking about differences in language proficiency and what it means for the individual, the team or the organization. In this section, we will first introduce the notion of a corporate language strategy and then turn to language practices in global teams.

Introduce a Language Strategy

A corporate language strategy refers to a range of techniques that are used to facilitate internal communications with employees and external communications with other stakeholders such as foreign clients and suppliers. It can be an outcome of a deliberate decision or of an emergent process such as the internationalizing firm gradually and continuously becomes more aware of language issues. Language strategies often have ill-defined goals, making it challenging to evaluate their success. What is also clear is that language strategies may differ from language practices on the ground.

A common corporate language often lies at the heart of the corporate language strategy. Multinational corporations mandate a common corporate language for several reasons. The Japanese Rakuten Group, a technology conglomerate, is a pioneering company in e-commerce with a vision of globalization. Hiroshi Mikitani, the founder of Rakuten Group, initiated a radical organizational change by imposing an English-only strategy on its operations in Japan as well as overseas. This meant that Rakuten officially changed its internal language from Japanese to English.[53] The goal of this "Anglicization" initiative was to facilitate the external communication with suppliers and customers and to enhance employer branding on a global scale. The Japanese employees who did not have the necessary competence in English, however, found themselves isolated.[54]

In KONE, where Alex's team is employed, the corporate language emerged over years from its internationalization experiences operating across linguistic boundaries. As described in the following section, the use of English at KONE is replete with acronyms such as V1 referring to new elevator and escalator business and V2 to modernization business and terminology specific to the management processes, history, industry and organizational culture of the company.

TRAPPED IN YOUR OWN JARGON?

KONE Corporation has a long history as a multilingual organization. When KONE opened its business in 1910 in Finland, the company was largely Swedish speaking. The initial shift from Swedish to Finnish took place in the late 1960s when the headquarters were relocated to a new facility outside Helsinki. In the early 1970s, after the acquisitions of many elevator and escalator companies in the Nordic countries, Austria, Canada and France, KONE started to publish its annual report in English. At that time, top managers

were for the first time also required to be able to function in an English-speaking work environment.[55]

Today, KONE, like many multinationals, uses "bad English" as its common corporate language. One of its advantages is that it reduces language-related stress that non-native speakers of English may experience. Over the years, KONE employees have collectively built a psychologically safe language climate in which people feel comfortable expressing themselves in a foreign language, regardless of their level of fluency, knowledge of grammar, extent of vocabulary or authenticity of accent in this language.[56] In this spirit, members of Alex's team appreciated each other based on professional skills and expertise rather than English skills. Team members were very understanding and empathetic towards language hurdles that many non-native speakers of English such as Yian and Camilla experienced as part of their daily work. In fact, Alex's team adapted its language use to the proficiency level of the weakest members for face-saving and protective purposes. In their meetings, they used English that was narrow and simplified in terms of sentence structures, basic words and clarity of pronunciation.

Paradoxically, however, these well-intentioned efforts had a negative effect on Alex's team: they led to an impoverished use of language. The highly simplified version of English, while useful for routine communications and interaction, was not rich enough for debating technical details, ideating or testing hunches, let alone solving complex problems.[57] It was simply too context-specific and not conceptually abstract enough to allow team members to execute creative, novel and complex tasks effectively.[58] Alex realized that the simplified English that their team used had become detrimental to innovative performance because the narrow vocabulary hindered effective knowledge transfer between multilingual team members. Alex's team had become trapped in its own jargon.

The relationship between impoverished language and innovation is an intriguing one. Unlike KONE, another Finnish high-tech company, Iceye, has positive experience of using English as a common corporate language in fostering innovation. Iceye provides earth observation data to governments and businesses through its microsatellites. As many engineers at Iceye use English as their second or third language, they have to be very focused and succinct in conveying the key message to colleagues or partners. The impoverished English language has actually been regarded as an advantage, rendering innovation processes more efficient. Perhaps the preciseness of "engineering language," including mathematics and the use of technological tools, is part of the explanation.

Language strategies adopted by international companies vary in terms of how strict or loose, formal or informal, proactive or reactive, implicit or explicit, planned or emergent they are.

The Rakuten case is an example of a very strict language strategy in which the shift to the English-only strategy weakened the Japanese employees' sense of belonging to the company. In fact, the transformation process was so dramatic that the Japanese employees felt like expatriates – as outsiders in a foreign land – although they were firmly located in Japan among familiar co-workers.[59] In such change processes, the role of top management as champions of the corporate language strategy is critical and Mikitani, the founder of the Rakuten Group, took on this role.

As the KONE example shows, language has the capacity to change the way global teams collaborate. While language obviously serves as a vehicle of communication in global teams, it

is also a force that alters patterns of communication and collaboration between team members. In the following we identify four unintended effects of operating in a common language,- mostly English, on the dynamics of global teams.

THE DARK SIDE OF LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT: THE FOUR S's

- **The silencing effect**: Imposing English reduces the amount and quality of communication between individuals (stilted and constrained interaction with less humor and irony; individual withdrawal from meetings and networks and information loss).
- **The sifting effect**: The team members who can communicate best in English often exert the most influence on collaboration. As gatekeepers, they control the flow of information and make decisions about what to filter, separate and select for translation and dissemination.
- **The sidetracking effect**: Team members' lack of fluency in the common working language can derail their career paths, effectively limiting or sidetracking career progression. Individuals may exit the company or invest in appropriate language training.
- **The stagnating effect**: The language barrier may be so pervasive that it leads to stagnation from a long-term perspective. As individuals become increasingly isolated they are effectively at a standstill, losing opportunities both within and outside the firm.

Source: Lauring and Tange (2010); Neeley (2015); Piekkari et al. (2014), pp. 235–6.

Create an Inclusive Language-Sensitive Work Environment

Global team leaders can mitigate the unintended effects of operating in a common language – or the four S's – by creating an inclusive language-sensitive work environment and using inclusive language. As the example of Alex's team suggests, global teams often opt for "bad English" as their shared language to foster tolerance of accents and create a common ground and solidarity among non-native team members. In an inclusive work environment, language requirements are lowered (but not too much!) to enhance team functioning and prevent any discomfort or frustration. However, managers also need to acknowledge that the use of English as a working language does not make the team monolingual. Instead of striving for English-only practices, managers may encourage team members to draw on their non-English language resources as a valuable means for accomplishing the tasks at hand. For example, the team's multilingualism can be made clear through the introduction of untranslatable words and expressions that may serve as sources of inspiration and innovation in brainstorming sessions and windows into cultural differences. The Finnish word *sisu* is one of the untranslatable words that refers to determination, guts, courage and willpower.

Teams may also agree upon flexible rules and practices for code-switching, that is the frequent change of the cultural code in use, to accommodate different cultural norms, for example, changing from the common working language to the use of another language that other team members may or may not speak or even understand in order to preempt negative reactions to code-switching.[60]

Paying more attention to how we speak to each other is also a crucial aspect of drastically reducing discrimination within a team or organization in general. Words are powerful as they can uplift and engage collaborators, but also disengage, offend, disrespect or exclude. Even if not intended, simple phrases like "Looks like we're going to need more manpower" or "Your wives are warmly welcome to the Board's party" express subtle, unconscious biases and acceptance of masculine norms that might leave some collaborators feeling excluded. An inclusive language avoids offensive and negative expressions that imply ideas that are sexist, racist or otherwise biased, prejudiced or denigrating towards any particular group of people.

HOW TO USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

Terms such as "manpower" or "chairman" make maleness the default gender, triggering an image in peoples' minds of a group of males rather than a group of males, females and people identifying as neither. Using the word "chair" instead describes the same positions without signaling gender. Such language use is more inclusive. How masculine language that undercuts the representation of women and gender non-conforming people can be changed is debated differently in different countries. American linguist McWhorter, for example, proposes to use the singular "they" to replace gender binary pronouns "she" and "he." The international news agency AP recommended journalists not to write "the" anymore in phrases like "the disabled" or "the poor" because the use of "the" in this way could be interpreted as dehumanizing. While this is meant to be inclusive it can also bewilder and confuse. The risk associated with this kind of warning is that people's defenses go up and the intended goal of increasing sensitivity towards disadvantaged people is not achieved. People begin to fear that they will say the "wrong thing" and can no longer express themselves spontaneously, constraining communication within the team.

Source: EIGE (2019); Hopke (2022); Mahdawi (2023); McWhorter (2018).

Thus, multilingualism, in the broadest sense, encompassing both proficiency in different languages as well as tolerance of various accents and ways of speaking, is part and parcel of global leadership skills.

CONCLUSION

Leading global teams has become a critical factor for success in today's workplaces. These teams introduce both challenges and advantages. The challenges discussed in this chapter include geographic distance, time differences, technology dependence, cultural and language diversity as well as mobility and business travel.

Global leaders may respond to these challenges by using communication media strategically and by creating psychological safety and trust among team members when debating and disagreeing. Furthermore, leaders who recognize and acknowledge the linguistic diversity within the team and promote an inclusive language environment are able to foster knowledge sharing between team members. Inclusive language avoids negative and offensive expressions that alienate representatives of minority groups. When recruiting new team members, the

language requirements of the job should be critically revisited. Language requirements in job ads send a powerful signal to potential applicants about what kind of talent the team leader and the company are looking for. Although changing established practices of language use is challenging, it is a powerful means of promoting inclusion and diversity in the workplace. By using inclusive language, global teams can maximize the potential of all team members and promote long-term success.

The above practices are some examples of measures that assist in turning the challenges associated with global teams into advantages. Working with individuals from diverse educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds may generate unique perspectives and ideas, which enriches global collaboration and offers opportunities for learning and innovation. In addition, global teams can provide a better understanding of global markets and customers. At their best, global teams enhance employee engagement and well-being.

To conclude, while diversity in global teams is a given, culturally and contextually inclusive leadership is not. Team leaders equipped with such skills are able to make a difference and ensure that their teams thrive and succeed in the rapidly changing global environment.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Did you assume that Alex is of a specific gender? What are the possible implications of the team leader's gender for the interpersonal dynamics within a global team?
2. Identify from Alex's case the privileges related to the use of technology and other resources. What inequalities exist between the members in this team? More broadly, discuss how future organizations should blend digital and human capabilities.
3. How would you go about tackling potentially sensitive topics around diversity, equity and inclusion (see also Chapter 4) in your team? How can you embrace inclusive language, for example, addressing gender identities? What are the language and country-specific issues to consider?
4. What are the advantages and challenges of the "Anglicization" strategy at Rakuten? Can you imagine this happening in your country?

NOTES

1. We are not using team members' real names.
2. Stahl & Maznevski (2021).
3. Haas & Mortensen (2016).
4. Nurmi & Hinds (2016, 2020).
5. Gallup (2023).
6. For example, Bakker et al. (2014).
7. Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74).
8. Halbesleben & Wheeler (2008).
9. Demerouti et al. (2001).
10. Hill et al. (2022).
11. For burnout, see also Chapter 2.

12. Bakker & Demerouti (2007).
13. Demerouti et al. (2001).
14. Nurmi & Hinds (2016).
15. Gao & Sai (2020).
16. Hislop et al. (2015).
17. Nurmi & Hinds (2020).
18. Chamakiotis et al. (2013).
19. Hinds & Mortensen (2005).
20. For example, Kiesler & Cummings (2002).
21. For example, Lee (2016); Russell et al. (2017).
22. For example, Neeley (2015).
23. Henderson (2005).
24. Tenzer et al. (2014).
25. Piekkari et al. (2015).
26. See also Cultural Intelligence in Chapter 2.
27. Veli Korkmaz et al. (2022).
28. Fisher & Cooper (1990).
29. Nurmi & Hinds (2020).
30. Borg & Kristensen (1999).
31. Liese et al. (1997).
32. Borg & Kristensen (1999).
33. Lilischkis & Meyer (2003).
34. Nurmi & Hinds (2020).
35. Hinds & Cramton (2014).
36. Chang et al. (2011).
37. Bergener & Majchrzak (2012).
38. Klitmøller et al. (2015).
39. Espinosa & Carmel (2004).
40. Ibid.
41. Carmel et al. (2010).
42. Carmel & Espinosa (2011).
43. Edmondson & Bransby (2023).
44. Clark (2020).
45. Tannen (1995).
46. Bryant & Sharer (2021); Covey (2013).
47. Bodie et al. (2013).
48. Bauer & Figl (2008).
49. Bligh (2017).
50. Javidan & Zaheer (2020).
51. DiStefano & Maznevski (2000).
52. Lane & Maznevski (2019).
53. Rakuten Today (2021).

54. Neeley (2017). They were given two years to improve their English to a score of 800 on the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), see also Rakuten Today (2021).
55. Herlin (2014).
56. Nurmi & Koroma (2020).
57. Ibid.
58. Brannen & Doz (2012).
59. Neeley (2017).
60. Vigier & Spencer-Oatey (2017).

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