LEADING GLOBAL TEAMS

Global teams are groups of individuals who interact around a common objective and who represent a number of geographies across the globe. Such teams often arise because the people with the best expertise, knowledge or access to resources do not originate from the same geography. For example, a software development team may need the expertise of a designer from India, a systems expert from France, and a hardware specialist from the U.S. There is a need for the members to work together, even though they are not from the same place. As a result, global teams are also geographically dispersed, meaning that their members reside in and work from very different locations. They often communicate electronically rather than meeting face to face in the same room. Leading in a global team is the process of establishing direction and influencing others in such teams. This task may be more challenging in a global team than would be the case in a team composed of members who all originate from the same geography and reside in the same location. This entry describes key elements in leading global teams, provides an overview of success factors, and examines their significance in the global environment.

Leading Global Teams: Core Elements

Global teams come in a variety of shapes and sizes and are implemented for many different purposes. They can occur in almost any industry or sector, including technology, natural resources, entertainment, healthcare, education, military, or government. A global team may exist, for example, to provide emergency aid to stranded tsunami victims, and may consist
of local ground personnel at the site of the disaster, volunteers raising funds or providing resources from another continent, and transport and logistics experts assisting the team to get the resources to those in need. Or a global team may consist of pharmaceutical production specialists in four different business units of a multinational firm. Scholars have proposed a number of typologies and dimensions which capture the ways that such teams may differ. These are useful for understanding the leadership of global teams because they highlight the key elements that need to be addressed which may be different or unique in global teams. Four such dimensions are cultural diversity, geographic dispersion, reliance on electronic communication, and structural dynamism.

**Cultural Diversity.** This refers to the number of different cultural affiliations represented on the team. By definition, in a global team, these affiliations are often to differing national culture groups (e.g., Germany or Australia), but may also be to ethnic, regional, or even professional groups. Further, scholars recognize that each individual member likely has multiple cultural affiliations, with nationality being only one identity that has meaning for the member. Cultural diversity may complicate team processes, as it may lead to conflicts among team members due to different cognitive styles, cultural values, and allegiances. For example, team members from different countries are likely to have different communication styles, different ideas of what a team is, and how it operates, as well as different values regarding the best type of leadership, or what role work should play in one’s life. Even norms around knowledge sharing are different in different cultures, which may impede team effectiveness.

**Geographical Dispersion.** This refers to team members being located in different places. In a global team, members often span different country locations, but some members could be in different cities or regions of the same country. Communicating across distances and time zones
makes it more difficult to share knowledge and coordinate tasks. Since members are located in different places, they may be less aware of what those in other locations do not know and neglect to share or explain this information. Sharing this contextual or “situated” knowledge – such as information about local holidays, weather, culture, politics and sports events – is more difficult because members often take it for granted or find it difficult to explain or articulate. In addition, there are shorter windows of time for meetings in which all members are participating together when they are spread over different time zones, and meetings may have to be held very late at night or very early in the morning for some members. Team members at remote sites may be inadvertently left out of decision-making, or those joining conference calls at inconvenient times may be less engaged.

**Electronic Dependence.** This refers to team members’ reliance on technology to communicate. Global team members may rely on email, teleconferencing and videoconferencing, smart phones, collaborative software such as Sharepoint, Intranets, and new social media tools like wikis and social network sites to collaborate and share knowledge. Although these technologies make it possible to communicate and conduct work across distances, if members don’t see each other face-to-face or physical meetings or interactions, they may miss subtle gestures, expressions or other nonverbal cues team members display. These nonverbal signals through gestures and body language are absent in much electronic communication, making understanding and interpretation of meaning more difficult. Communicating electronically may restrict spontaneous and unplanned communication, and this may reduce the amount of creative synergy that is more easily established when team members have the opportunity to meet face to face.
**Dynamic Structure.** This refers to how often members leave the team and new ones join it, and to how stable or changeable members’ roles are. Rather than having stable membership, many global teams are short-term and project-based or involve frequent member turnover through temporary subcontracting or hiring people to do specific tasks. Increased turnover among team members also makes it hard to develop strong relationships and trust among members who do not interact frequently. It is difficult to preserve the ideas, information, knowledge and ways of doing things that the team develops as members work together when members are always coming and going. Finally, lack of knowledge of what each member can contribute makes it harder to assign responsibilities and coordinate around novel ideas.

**Key Success Factors**

Despite the inherent complexities in leading global teams, the elements reviewed above provide clues as to how to best facilitate their success. In general, these practices pertain to either the behavior of the leader themselves, or to the processes they can facilitate within the team in order to ensure effectiveness. Successful leadership behavior is highly situation-dependent, with some circumstances requiring decisiveness and others best suited for a collaborative, consensus-based approach. However, what seems to be most critical in global teams is the extent to which the leader demonstrates *intercultural competence*, defined as a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts. Leaders who are interculturally competent recognize subtle cues which indicate that members may be deploying different worldviews or cognitive styles. They suspend judgment as to which might be “the best” way, observing and listening so as to learn as much as possible from members. They can then adapt
their own behavior in order to build strong social interactions and relationships with, and among, the members, being sensitive to emotional reactions and particular member needs, and helping to ensure these are met. They are aware of how their own behavior affects others, and work to enable the success of others. Finally, they are able to manage their own work loads, the uncertainty they may face (in not necessarily knowing the one best way to lead), and the anxiety or stress that may accompany the complexity of the global team. Each of these behaviors on the part of the leader themselves can facilitate the effectiveness of the team.

With regard to team processes, what seems to be particularly important is that the leader helps to develop a *psychologically safe communication climate* characterized by support, trust, openness, mutual respect, and risk taking. Such a climate encourages members to speak up, engage in spontaneous and informal communication, provide unsolicited information, and bridge differences by suspending judgment, being open to different ideas and views, and performing active listening. When members engage in active listening, they provide their full attention and show that they are listening. Then, they ask questions to clarify anything they don’t understand, or ask the speaker to provide more details about their ideas. The listener may even repeat back what they think they heard the speaker say, to check whether they indeed heard them correctly. This makes the speaker feel comfortable that their message is getting across, and that their ideas are respected. It is important to note that the listener does not have to always agree with the speaker. But even if they don’t, communicating that they are listening and that the ideas expressed are respected is important. If members feel that they will be heard and respected, they are more likely to share ideas, particularly if these ideas are different, unusual, or risky.

Psychological safety has been found to be important for team learning and innovation, as it helps mitigate interpersonal risks and encourages members to admit mistakes, question practices, and
ask for help and feedback. It promotes open sharing of information and situated knowledge across geographic locales and contexts. It may also increase informal communication and feedback to overcome problems resulting from reduced face-to-face interaction and lack of social cues in electronic communication. Members may feel comfortable being more spontaneous and “improvising” rather than being hesitant and restricted by protocol or past routines. It can help strengthen relationships in teams with high turnover by building trust and reducing perceptions of risk, as well as providing incentives to build a shared history, contributing to work flow. Finally, a psychologically safe communication climate can help bridge cultural differences, as team members who communicate supportively are more likely to develop shared understanding and integrate new knowledge to reach new solutions. In these ways, a psychologically safe communication climate can help to reduce challenges due to cultural diversity, geographic dispersion, electronic dependence, and dynamic structure.

The Significance of Leadership in Global Teams

The current popularity of global teams makes leading such teams critical for the success of many endeavors, from new product innovation, to human service delivery, in profit and non-profit environments all across the world. This places a premium on training and developing global leaders, both in universities and in the organizations that deploy such teams. Fortunately, educators and scholars have identified a number of skills and processes which appear to facilitate their success, and hence provide a mandate for global leadership development. It is likely that these skills will become basic foundation for all leaders, as collaborative efforts more often become global, than local.

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See also Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Competence; Globalization

**FURTHER READINGS**


