30 Sept 2011

GLOBAL TEAMS: MANAGING MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE

Advice to bear in mind

1. Remember that different cultural values and communication preferences affect how feedback is given and received in the different societies where your organisation may operate.

2. You will need to balance the need to be clear and honest with the need to maintain face and relationships.

3. The extent to which you can be direct varies across cultures. For instance, Australians can find colleagues from some Eastern European cultures extremely direct, whereas we can be experienced as confrontational by some Asian cultures. Imagine a continuum, with extremes at either end, and many possible positions in between.

4. Western performance appraisal systems have been designed to suit employees with individual, task and achievement orientations, as well as small hierarchical differences. Outside those norms, such systems face risks.

5. An effective global manager will stay focused on the desired outcome (high performance and good relationships) while adjusting their approach appropriately.

Exploring performance across cultural boundaries

In a recent team building project with a multinational client, we had the opportunity to film a performance appraisal conversation two ways round. First, we asked an Australian manager, Andrea, to show how she would tackle a specific performance problem with an Asian staff member. Then we invited Priya, an Indian manager, to demonstrate the same conversation. But this time Andrea would play the role of the team member and Priya would be her appraising manager. Finally, we filmed an interview with Priya and Andrea as they viewed the footage together, each explaining their quite different approaches and the priority concerns they had in mind. The filmed experiment illuminated for the entire executive team some of the performance management challenges they struggle with on a regular basis, enabling them to work together to devise practical solutions. This newsletter details some of what emerged, since many of you tell us that global teamwork is very much a concern right now.

The Western way

In English-speaking cultures, it's generally accepted that people will want to know if there's a problem with their performance, so that they can address it, with the support of their manager. Typically, managers emphasise positive aspects of a team member's work and make encouraging statements about their future improvement and success. Overall, the focus is on individual accountability. The usual style of such conversations is friendly, direct and evidence-based.

In our experiment, Andrea took this problem-solving approach. She told Priya, "I really think there are some areas you could work on that would help you develop professionally." She then moved to a more upfront clarification of just what the issue was, "You need to work on what was stopping you meeting deadlines and on being fairly argumentative in the team meetings." Priya repeatedly attempted to make the discussion less specific and less goal-oriented, trying to alert Andrea to her emotional reaction. But Andrea stayed task-focused and, in fact, became increasingly direct and honest. Finally, Priya made her feelings obvious and she exclaimed, "I feel so humiliated!" Andrea was shocked.

The source of the problem

In cultures such as Priya's, singling out someone for direct criticism and blame can be seen as highly confrontational. Such an approach risks compounding the problem through causing an intense loss of self-esteem. In all societies where face concerns are paramount, negative statements are often packaged more indirectly. The listener decodes the slightly obscured intention and, in this way, face is saved on both sides.

The Asian way

This way of dealing with a tricky situation was illustrated when we filmed Priya in the manager role. She began by stating that she actually wanted to speak to everyone about the team's performance, not just Andrea. She constantly used qualifiers such as 'maybe' or 'perhaps' to tone down her comments and she also used 'we' rather than 'you'. She commented, "Maybe some people were speaking too much. Perhaps some of us took a more argumentative approach that intimidated others."

Afterwards, Andrea explained that Priya's 'high context' approach had not been at all helpful to her. "I just wanted her to be straight with me! I wanted to know exactly what the problem was, so I could fix it." In fact, Andrea felt that Priya must be hiding something and that the problem must be much larger than it turned out to be. But Andrea's comments surprised Priya. She explained, "Singling someone out could have a disastrous effect on Andrea's motivation, so I tried to make it a 'we' problem, or a group problem that we would all work on together."

A clash of cultural attitudes to giving feedback

The key point is that neither Andrea nor Priya was successful in realising their intentions. A culturally literate manager would adjust their feedback style according to the background of their team member. As our filmed experiment demonstrated, this isn't a one way process. People from every cultural group in a global team need to make adjustments when dealing with their colleagues, in order to promote collaboration and good working relations.

What doesn't work is the assumption that 'management' is a value-free practice and that Western management approaches have universal applicability. The different priorities of individualist and collectivist cultures lie at the heart of attitudes to appraisal systems, incentive schemes and, indeed, to the question of what motivates people. If feedback is not to jeopardise team cohesion, it needs to be given in a way that is compatible with cultural norms.

Of course, this is not to say that a global company cannot standardise its appraisal system. Instead, it highlights the need to take a more nuanced approach, one that involves some consultation and recognition that values, such as individual achievement and accountability, will need to be exposed to scrutiny, discussion and perhaps some adjustment globally.

In a recent study, Chinese and US managers were asked how they would tackle a particular performance problem. The Americans said they would confront the person with direct feedback, while the Chinese said they would speak to others in an attempt to shame the person, or teach them a moral lesson. Rather different approaches!