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WORKING ACROSS TIME, DISTANCE AND CULTURE

Holding a productive telephone conference

1. Email everyone a few days ahead with the meeting's purpose, start and finish times and agenda.
2. Consider discussing particular agenda items with individuals ahead of the meeting. This can increase involvement of team members from 'face' based cultures.
3. Cover routine business in another way e.g. an email
4. Ensure clear introductions at the start.
5. Remind all present about your meeting protocols e.g. stating your name before contributing a point.
6. Keep the talk close to the agenda and sum up progress at intervals to promote clarity and cohesion.
7. Draw in quieter team members regularly. Don't allow interruptions or overlapping talk.
8. At the end, summarise decisions and actions. Outline how follow-up will take place. Thank everyone. Get action-oriented minutes out quickly.
9. Regularly seek reviews so that there is continuous improvement of meeting processes.

Welcome to the global, virtual world!

Carol Reilly lives in Melbourne and leads the network support team for a shipping and parcels company with business interests in 14 countries worldwide. Her team is responsible for handling all network problems. It's the constant monitoring and fine tuning of their system that helps the company to coordinate complex tasks in what is a fast changing and very competitive sector.

Although several of Carol's team members are located in Melbourne, the rest are scattered around the globe. They organise their work to 'follow the sun'. This means part of the team is always operational during daylight hours in their own time zone, with any unsolved problems passed along to the next team to take up the baton. For all this to work smoothly, the team must have the skills to collaborate across the once fixed boundaries of time, distance and culture.

What's the same? What's different?

As Carol prepares for her monthly team meeting, many of the issues at the forefront of her mind would be similar to those preoccupying managers of any team. After all, every team needs to share knowledge, collaborate to solve problems, coordinate work efforts and plan for the longer term.

Yet over and above these typical challenges, Carol has to decide how she'll use the technology available to her to make her meeting work. She casts her eye over the agenda she emailed to everyone two days ago and considers the pros and cons of structuring the meeting as a series of emails, a telephone conference, a video conference or even using the company's electronic meeting system. She's learned the hard way that the technology she selects must suit the outcome she wants. She's also learned the hard way that she has to factor in cultural differences.

Finally she looks over the team's discussion site and checks the time slots when different people are available. It's soon clear that some team members will have to 'attend' this meeting at a later time. Whose presence should she prioritise?

The absence of social clues

This is the world of virtual teams where people are geographically dispersed but electronically connected. In such a team, you might have to work with someone you hardly know or have never even met. In global virtual teams, life can get quite complex. For instance, different expectations and assumptions, together with different, culturally-based work styles, can undermine success and even obscure problems which are actually performance based.

Virtual teams need to overcome the lack of rich, social, emotional and non-verbal information available in face-to-face settings. This is all about learning to adapt more traditional team skills to environments where most interactions take place through the medium of technology. At UGM, we have been researching this challenge for the last ten years, going into client organisations and analysing what works and what doesn't. We see over and over again that old ways of working don't deliver the same results in these virtual settings – they can even be counter-productive.

The core of the problem is often caused by launching straight into a project where collaboration across borders is going to be a feature, without thinking through the specific insights and skills people will need to make it work.

We've also seen that, in the post GFC business environment, organisations are increasingly turning to virtual teams as efficiency or cost cutting measures. But the ability to reap the benefits of this way of working are dependent on understanding the unique features of global teams which distinguish them from face-to-face teams. These unique features must then be translated into competencies and systematically developed.

Trust and rapport harder

The addition of cultural differences to the mix complicates things still further. Our research has underscored that the absence of the usual visual clues which in a face-to-face interaction can signal goodwill, throws the burden of communication on to those very features of conversation which are known to provoke intolerance and negative evaluations.

For instance, if someone sounds a little abrupt face to face, we can offset their words with the effect their smile, gaze and body language have on us. We might then conclude that, while their way of getting their point across was a bit irritating, overall they seem friendly enough. We give them the benefit of the doubt and accept they're probably well-intentioned. But the same words in an email or in a telephone conference can leave us without those all-important social clues of 'good intentions'. We can dismiss the person as rude or even incompetent.

Extraordinary combinations of people are the goal

Our research demonstrates that the erosion of trust and rapport are common problems facing virtual global teams. This matters as these are the glue that hold things together across the divides of time and culture. Today organisations are starting to rely less on what extraordinary individuals have to offer and more on the achievements of extraordinary combinations of people, whatever their location.