

Collaborating Across Cultures: Key to Success for Global Projects - Part 1

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This piece is the first of a three-part series that explores how global project teams can collaborate more successfully through better communications. Our featured company, while fictitious, represents a composite of many of the companies we have worked with.

GenCo IT Director Jim Kingsley has never faced such a complex—and exciting—challenge in his 25-year professional career. CIO Gretchen Baker just tapped Jim to head up a highly visible, make-or-break global project for GenCo, a U.S.-based multinational maker of automobile and truck supplies. At the heart of “Operation Unity” is a state-of-the-art enterprise application that will integrate many of GenCo’s vital business processes, such as order entry, manufacturing, distribution, sales and marketing.

If successful, Operation Unity promises to help catapult GenCo to a solid market leadership position before the competition has a chance to blink. If not, GenCo’s chances for profitable survival over the next five years are bleak.

Jim is free to choose the best and the brightest from among IT and business groups spanning those business functions most likely to be affected. Though he hasn’t had much experience working with people from outside of the U.S., Jim realizes that he needs participation from those countries where GenCo shows the most growth potential: Singapore, Japan, Germany, France and the U.K.

Jim appoints Mark Levenger as his project manager, a 20-year GenCo IT veteran with demonstrated ability to bring in projects under budget and in time. Mark’s “command-and-control” management style has drawn accolades from senior IT management, although few project team members would willingly work for him a second time. Jim trusts Mark to get the job done, in large part because their management styles are remarkably similar.

Gretchen and Jim both realize the value of face-to-face connections to start a project off on the right foot. However, owing to severe budget and time constraints they reluctantly agree to forego a “live” meeting. Instead, Gretchen, Jim and Mark map out a plan for “virtual” team meetings via phone and videoconference. They will supplant meetings with an interactive Intranet forum and frequent e-mails.

Neither Mark nor Jim has worked abroad, and neither has had extensive experience working with colleagues or customers from outside the U.S. Gretchen suggests that GenCo hire us, Chrysalis International, a firm specializing in helping IT organizations communicate more effectively across cultures. When Jim protests that he hasn’t allocated any budget for this consulting, Gretchen offers to pay out of the corporate IT budget, so convinced is she that some up-front team learning will save considerable time and expense in the long-run.

Cross-cultural communications learning in “real time”

Gretchen, Jim, Mark and I met in Gretchen’s office one afternoon two weeks before the official project launch. In reviewing the profiles of each project team member, we discovered that except for the European members, most have had limited experience working outside of their cultures. We did make an assumption, however, that project-related communications could be understood (at least to some extent) in English, since fluency in English is a precondition for employment.

We decided to hold a series of three project team meetings focusing on cross-cultural communications: one as part of the project kick-off, another two weeks into the project, and a third four weeks after the project launch. Our objective: To help team members collaborate successfully through better communications.

Jim and Mark, while agreeing to this plan, were not entirely convinced that these meetings were needed. “Why can’t we just issue a document that outlines the communication standards that we expect?” asked Mark. “That way, everyone will see what’s expected in black-and-white. We can use very simple language to make sure everyone understands.”

I verified that Operation Unity was regarded as a “global” project. “In that case, whose communication ‘standards’ would you suggest using?” I asked. Each of the cultures represented on the team had different notions of acceptable communications standards. It was crucial that each member understand the different communication styles and preferences represented on the team. That way, they could make well-informed choices about how and when to best communicate with others and anticipate any issues that may arise. The *team* would then develop the standards by which they wanted to communicate.

With permission from Jim and Mark, I e-mailed a brief questionnaire (see below) to each of the nine core team members and scheduled a 20-minute phone interview to discuss their responses. This way, I could tailor the content for our first session, a two-hour videoconference slated from 7-9 AM EST the following Tuesday. I was the only one to review individual responses. Mark e-mailed a memo in advance to let team members know what I planned to do and why.

Operation Unity project team questionnaire

1. What cultures have you worked with most frequently?
2. What challenges have you faced, if any, in working with other cultures?
3. Are there some kinds of communications that seem more difficult than others (for example, videoconference meetings, live presentations, e-mails, phone calls or group meetings)?
4. Are there some cultures that seem more difficult to work with than others are? If so, please describe some of the problems you have had.
5. What would you most like to understand about the other cultures of your project team members (U.K., Japan, Singapore, France, Germany and the U.S.)?
6. What would you most like your team members to know about your culture?
7. Can you please give advice to the project manager to help make sure that the project team works well together?

Understanding commonly-shared needs

Team members were refreshingly candid in their responses. I summarized the results for Mark and Jim, who found them to be “eye-opening.” Among the highlights:

- ☑ The Europeans were the most comfortable and experienced in working across cultures, mostly from within Europe and with Americans. All could speak at least three languages (except the U.K. delegate, who spoke two). As expected, neither the American nor the Asian team members had much experience working outside of their own cultures. All had at least some experience working with Americans.
- ☑ Nearly all of the challenges cited had to do with language barriers and lack of sensitivity to other cultures. The U.S. was singled out as being an “insular culture” that “doesn’t seem to know or care how the rest of the world operates.”
- ☑ Most agreed that making live presentations presented the toughest challenge, followed by group meetings. Many said they relied on others in the office to help make sense of many written communiqués from other cultures.
- ☑ Since most people had worked with Americans, it was not surprising that Americans were regarded as the most difficult culture to work with. Reasons included the speed at which Americans insist on making decisions; the expectation that all cultures comprehend English as well as they speak it; and the apparent belief that the rest of the world “should play by America’s rules.”
- ☑ Most respondents wanted to better understand the *reasons* for different communication styles and preferences and how best to handle differences when they occur. Many could describe the “symptoms” of these differences, but were at a loss when trying to explain the *causes*.
- ☑ Although many could not say what they most wanted others to know of their own culture, most said they would be happy to help others learn whatever they wanted to know.
- ☑ Advice for Mark boiled down to this: Treat this as a truly global team and not an American-run team. Respect our differences and realize how much we can all contribute and learn when we take the time to listen to each other.

Creating a workable agenda

These results were fairly typical of geographically dispersed project team members meeting for the first time. What was *not* typical was that their kick-off meeting would be held via videoconference, which would greatly inhibit the group’s ability to gel right up front.

We decided to use each of the three sessions in different ways. Our first session, an hour long, would come after Jim and Mark's initial project kick-off. The next two team meetings would be devoted in their entirety to cross-cultural communications. We were confined to videoconferencing for all three meetings. (However, throughout this period I encouraged team members to call me or send mail during this entire period whenever they ran into problems, and I provided whatever coaching I could.)

Here is the agenda Jim and Mark agreed to and communicated in advance:

1. The first session would be a “primer” on key cultural differences and basic communications concepts
2. The second would feature “just in time learning,” incorporating real-life examples that I planned to ask team members to provide to me (which I would keep anonymous)
3. The third would dig deeper into any particular areas that team members were finding problematic as the project progressed. Issues and examples would be unearthed in confidential interviews I would conduct with team members and managers about one week prior to the third meeting. As a group, we would aim to create constructive solutions to some of most frequently recurring problems.

Running interference up front

I managed to persuade Jim and Mark to let me run through their pieces with them the day before our first team meeting. Here are some of the problems I identified, along with recommendations:

- Jim had planned to “motivate the troops” with a host of sports allegories that *may* have inspired an American audience, but would have turned off an international team. If he *had* to use any sports allegories, I advised that he use soccer (a sport almost all countries can relate to). Better still to drop the allegories altogether.
- Both Jim and Mark spoke very quickly to cram in all of their “critical messages” in the hour they were allotted. They would need to allow *at least* 150% of time they would need for an American audience, which meant they had to become very selective about their content. They also needed to build in time for pauses, both to accommodate the slight delays inherent in most videoconferencing technology, as well as to gauge whether their audience had truly comprehended what they had said. If not, they would need to repeat the same point, choosing different words.
- Jim wanted to break the ice with “a little humor.” Even though the joke he planned to tell was probably as “safe” as any could be, different cultures find humor in very different places. Jokes that backfire tend to make people feel uncomfortable. Some may even feel embarrassed (or lose respect) for the one telling the joke. Far better to avoid humor altogether, until the team has had a chance to develop relationships. Team members would soon discover many areas about which they could probably share a good laugh.

- ☑ Mark was proud of his rich vocabulary and liked to use it. While that may have impressed native English speakers, a non-English speaking group would have difficulty comprehending him. He needed to use more common terms and enunciate them clearly.
- ☑ Being from New England, Jim tended to drop his R's when they belonged and added them when they did not. He should work hard at his pronunciation when addressing an international audience. Accents can distract and in some cases block meaning.
- ☑ Mark had come up with a clever way to introduce team members. (He would ask them to describe their history at GenCo and their current role, and to provide a verbal “family snapshot.”) This approach could backfire for a few reasons. People from many cultures do not normally like to disclose anything of a personal nature at the beginning of a relationship and some *never* do. (On the other hand, in some cultures it is not possible to do business with them *until* something of a personal nature is shared.) Putting people on the spot to make public what may be regarded as intensely private information is never a good idea. I suggested he ask them to provide their names, GenCo background, current job responsibilities, and ask each what qualities are most important in a project manager. This would remove the spotlight from them and help Mark to assess what attributes he needed to demonstrate for a successful jump-start.
- ☑ Mark's ending was a bit abrupt before he turned the remainder of the meeting to me. I suggested he summarize all key points made by him and Jim, and end with any specific actions or near-term milestones the team should keep in mind. Many cultures look for a summary at the end of each presentation and appreciate specificity.

Steep learning curve

If the managers were in such need of some “communications fundamentals,” I figured the team members would need a great deal of help as well. Funnily enough, it turned out that the managers had the most to learn, perhaps because they had spent so much of their careers *telling* people what they needed to do, rather than *listening*— which I regard as *the* key to becoming a successful international collaborator.

Another reason Jim and Mark had so much to learn: By their own admission, they had never been curious about other cultures. (“The international language of business is English,” Mark had pointed out early on. “It seems that they have much more to learn from *us* than we have to learn from *them*.”) An authentic desire to understand cultural differences and work through them rather than ignore them that creates the potential for a sensitive and ultimately successful cross-cultural communicator.

In our next article we will discuss some of the communications problems our team encountered early on, including the underlying reasons and possible solutions. Our third and final part of the series will provide coaching tips for individual team members as well as our management team, to help them become successful contributors in future global projects.