The Intricate
web
Connecting
VIRTUAL TEAMS

Global, virtual teams must learn how to align behaviors and collaborate across cultures and around the world.

BY MAUREEN BRIDGET RABOTIN

*I*solated or *meaningful*; *lousy* or *creative*; and *challenging* or *refreshing* are six words that show the extreme reactions to the most common questions about working on a virtual team. There seems to be no in-between.

When a person is asked how it feels to work virtually, an answer such as "isolated" is more common than "meaningful." When it comes to the team spirit, the word choice of "lousy" or "creative" often has more to do with the team leader than the team itself. And what is it like working from home? "Challenging" to "refreshing" usually reveals how the team is structured as to their work-life balance.

We need to shift the pendulum to *meaningful*, *creative*, and *refreshing*. This can be accomplished by learning to manage effective e-teams that are global and multicultural.

Virtual team versus remote team

To check if virtual is your new reality, ask yourself:
- How often do my team and I communicate via electronic means?
- How often do I physically meet with my team members?

If you answered "often" or "always" to the first question, and "rarely" or "never" to the second, then you are part of today's increasingly proliferate form of teamwork: the geographically dispersed virtual team. As the term *virtual team* has come to describe an animal of many shapes and forms, definitions need to be shared.

A virtual team is a group of individuals who work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of information and telecommunication technology. What distinguishes virtual teams from remote teams is the organizational structure.

While virtual teams share similar characteristics, struggles, challenges, and opportunities with any high-performing remote team, these teams have an added layer or two of complexity. Virtual teams do not share a common native language, time zone, or country and usually have different managers. This means that influencing skills are of utmost importance because the manager of a project has no "hire and fire" power or authority over the team members.

Global multicultural teams

GMT is not only a time zone, but an ever-increasing trend: global multicultural teams. GMTs are geographically dispersed around the globe and, thus, share the challenge and complexity of culture. This includes the visible and invisible layers of national, regional, corporate, functional, team, and inherent personal cultures such as generational, gender, social, and linguistic cultures. That's complexity multiplied to the nth degree.

A team working across time zones means that they work 24 hours a day, which translates into productivity for companies but challenges for team members. For companies, new global interconnectivity gives them access to the best talent without geographical restrictions. For team members with no office walls, com-muter constraints, or traffic to consider, the challenge is to build boundaries and define a shared perspective of outcomes.

All work groups and teams are haunted by which best practices to use when handling conflict, enabling effective decision making, and building team spirit. In virtual teams, the occasional face-to-face encounters around the coffee machine just don't happen. The lack of these informal get-togethers decreases the sense of belonging and increases ambiguity and uncertainty in the virtual teams' no man's land. Nonverbal behaviors are lost in the wide world of web conferencing, thus increasing cultural and linguistic misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Time-pressured projects accelerate the need for trust, while diverse leadership styles and various communication skills slow things down.

This is the new reality—a virtual landscape laden with minefields. Geographically dispersed teams are in dire need of explicit team charters that proactively address this new level of complexity. Discussions defining roles, responsibilities, email etiquette, and expectations of when to work and when not to are necessary. These simple steps for success often are overlooked. By taking the time to explicitly design a team charter, virtual teams lay the foundation for alignment, accountability, and clarity. With this in place, the complexity of cultural and interpersonal skills can then be addressed.

Underlying issues

How does this show up in everyday communication? Read the example in the adjacent sidebar and define how different cultural factors are influencing the communication and the success of that team's coherence.

These factors are the invisible side of GMTs, those values that provoke thoughts that turn into beliefs, assumptions, actions, behaviors, and then habits. Simply stated: Culture. It has been said, demonstrated, researched, and revealed that culture eats strategy for breakfast. When left unsaid—or hidden under the disguise of "we all get along"—culture will lie dormant until, in the midst of a crisis and when we least expect it, it raises its ugly head.

Misunderstandings and Misinterpretations

The annual conference allowed a dispersed team to meet in the beautiful capital of Estonia where they discussed future global projects. Now it was time for their first virtual meeting via Skype. Static photos showed team members at their best either professionally or in their personal lives enjoying their favorite sports. The meeting was called to order with a detailed agenda that focused on two specific actions on which to decide. The main speaker then invited the participants to introduce themselves and explain what they sought to accomplish by the end of the call.

After everyone had done this, the American jumped in to say, "Hey, while you were all catching up with each other, I went ahead and handled the first action item on the agenda. I googled which website domains were available and secured the name: FineTime-global.com. Unfortunately FineTime.com already has been taken by somebody in China. Our department has paid for the annual fee this year but we'll run a budget by you for next year. How does that sound?"

Silence. The other seven team members from the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, France, Tokyo, Morocco, and Brazil were speechless.

Bob, the American, was pretty pleased with himself. He thought his efficiency was going to be the driver behind this new project. If you were to ask his colleagues to describe him, they would certainly say, "quick thinker, fast mover, and gets things done." That's what Bob was all about, and that made him proud. Unfortunately, this time, the silence lingered and the conversation lost its momentum. The agenda had called for a decision on two actions, not necessarily the action itself.

That is when culture becomes the scapegoat for all that went wrong or the verbal stereotypical backlash that defines national culture.

But what is culture? It is the underlying beliefs learned over time and through experience that become our individual compass of right and wrong. Even though we know one culture cannot be right and another wrong, we are surprised by the deep judgmental churning in our stomach that gurgles up into an overwhelming feeling of "I wouldn't have done it that way."

In the sidebar example, Bob's action-oriented, efficient manner alienated those who were more reflective and needed time to think things through. This is one example of never-ending reconciliation dilemmas that, in this case, is between results and relationships. Which comes first? How much time is needed to build a relationship before launching a product? This is one of many polarizing if not paralyzing effects of things being left unsaid or undefined.

A third culture

So what can GMTs do about it? After laying the foundation with a team charter, a workshop around values and building a third culture is extremely beneficial. Team members choose their personal values, define their strengths, describe what these look like in everyday life, and then align these with the organizational, corporate, regional, functional, and team values. Together they share how these attributes add value to, or decrease value in, the team's desired outcomes.

Bringing implicit, invisible cultural assumptions to explicit, visible behaviors is the first step to developing clarity in communication. The team defines expectations and reminds members of aligned outcomes. This is how we remove the interpersonal squabbles in a virtual environment. This is how we get buy-in, commitment, and ownership. Here are five simple steps to sustainable success:

- Bring the team together for important face-to-face bonding.
- Take the time to develop a team charter that defines the roles and responsibilities, the cycles of success, and discontentment that all working groups go through.
- During at least a full-day workshop, discover and develop the values that will drive team coherence. Trust based on a sense of belonging will help ride the waves of the team's phases of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.
- Demonstrate and deploy desired behaviors, not only top-down, but also across, sideways, and always. That is integrity in action.
- Coach the team; make sure team members are comfortable with peer coaching. Coaching is communication at its best, which brings clarity to thoughts and comfort to the virtual team's discomfort of not knowing one another or oneself.

After this face-to-face event, you will turn the team into an intercultural and inclusive team. If culture is left out of the picture, it will only add another layer of mis-everything, including missed targets. When GMT is your new time zone, then managing effective e-teams that are global and multicultural requires grappling with the unknown, the uncomfortable, and the uncertainty in a volatile, ambiguous world where the speed of trust, transparency, and transactions wait for no one.

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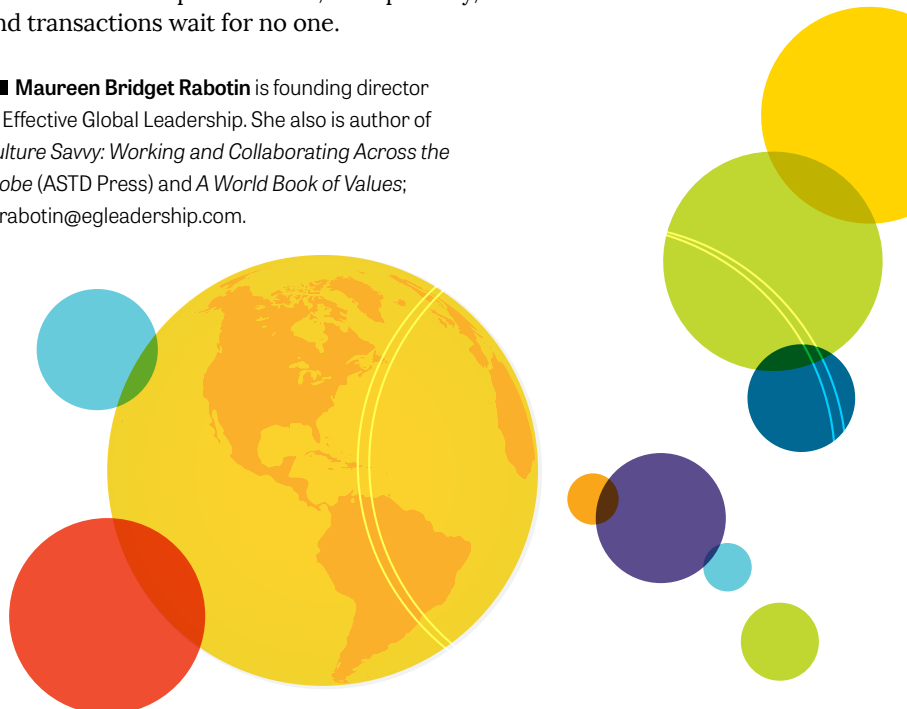
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