



Communication and Culture Tips for Global Managers

by Karine Schomer

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When offshore outsourcing or other cross-border business ventures run into implementation difficulties, managers and team members often point to “communication problems” as the root cause. This attribution occurs both in anecdotal responses and in formal surveys.

But what is meant, exactly, by “communication problems”? Weaknesses in the project management aspects of communication? Generic weaknesses in the art of effective communication on the part of individuals in your teams? Cross-cultural differences in the approach and protocols of communication? Unless you can untangle this web and pinpoint where those costly communication gaps are (or may be in the future if your work is just starting), it’s unlikely you’ll be successful in either resolving or preventing them.

Project Management Communication Processes

You have a project management communication gap if there is an inadequate flow of information among all the project stakeholders if there is no system for integrating all the aspects of the project objectives . . . if there are no processes in place for accurately reporting the status or projects or coordinating projects . . . if there is no streamlining of the organization, and individual managers create duplicative sub-organizations . . . or if the processes and technology you use for virtual communications are unsuited to the needs of participants.

The list could go on, but the main point is self-evident: you must have first-rate project management communication systems and processes in place. This is the bottom line.

No amount of communication skills training or cross-cultural awareness building will compensate for weaknesses in the underlying framework of systems and processes.

Tips for a Global Manager

Invest in developing and hiring project management expertise, a first-rate project management information system customized to your needs, integration of your project management processes with those of your outsourcing partners, training of team members on all sides in the communication processes of your enterprise, and ways to capture and remedy communication failures when they take place.

Personal Communication Skills

Are the members of your teams (especially those in leadership, management and coordination roles) able to present ideas and convey information with clarity and impact? Are they able to engender trust and believability? Do they know how to plan their communications and consider their impacts? Do they know how to listen and test for understanding? Are they able to elicit and handle feedback well? Can they distinguish between facts and interpretations? Do they know how to check for assumptions and verify what they think they have heard? Do they seek to understand miscommunications rather than to blame? Weaknesses in any of these personal communication skills areas can hamper the success of any team, undermining the best of communication systems and processes.

Tips for a Global Manager

Assess communication skills as part of your hiring processes. Identify gaps and provide



remediation through ongoing training and coaching in team and leadership communication (including just-in-time feedback processes). Develop team cultures that are self-reflective and self-correcting about interpersonal miscommunications.

Cultural Communication Differences

You have a cross-cultural communication gap if you're running into differences in approaches and expectations in communication that are not acknowledged, understood or bridged. Are there differences around directness and candor as opposed to diplomacy and face-saving? Is there a preference for explicit communication that spells things out or implicit communication that leaves much to inference? Do "yes," "no," "maybe" and silence have different meanings? Are there differences in expectations around push-back and challenging the statements made by other people or in the degree to which questions will be asked if something has not been understood?

This list, too, could go on and on — all the way from these overall patterns of communication to specifics of accents and divergent uses of the English language. Surprisingly, this cross cultural dimension of communication is the one most frequently underestimated in global business undertakings, even though the potential for miscommunication in any particular interaction is magnified every time

About the Author

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differences in culture are involved. I've been consistently struck by how most companies (both onshore outsourcing buyers and offshore service providers) expend considerable resources on all other aspects of the relationship and training of their project teams, but don't see bridging the cross-cultural communication differences as a discrete success factor in its own right.

Tips for a Global Manager

Starting with yourself, assure region-specific cross cultural awareness among all sides of the onshore-offshore relationship. Resist the temptation to dismiss the importance of cultural differences. Verify your offshore partner's assurances that their people understand your culture and its communication style well. Involve everyone in cross-cultural training with special focus on differences in communication approaches and protocols. Gradually build a culture that recognizes these differences and works with their respective strengths. Train project managers and leaders to spot and identify where cross-cultural "noise" is the key factor of a miscommunication and to address it accordingly — not as a project management or simple communication skills issue.

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