

# Collaborating Virtually in the Global Workplace: Practical Ideas to Measure Your Global Team Effectiveness

*By Andrew Graham*

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No one ever told me how to manage people from three countries across six time zones. We talked about international business in graduate school, but that was more from the finance and marketing perspective. Lessons about managing people had to be learned the hard way.

The ability to work with people we rarely see, diverse people from different regions of the globe, is increasingly required to be successful. Most global executives have developed the necessary skills through trial and error (and quite possibly a few immersion classes). The lessons learned are often very personal and as a result, the new skills do not always transfer back into an organization's culture.

## Global Collaboration

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When executed effectively, global collaboration enables an energetic workplace where teamwork is enhanced through the creation of a diverse collection of ideas.

At the center of effective global relationships is our ability to communicate. There are three areas that must be considered when designing a collaborative team environment: the people, the process, and the technology. We must be able to adapt to different work styles and cultures, leverage team processes, and utilize appropriate technologies to create efficiencies in the global workplace.

Teamwork in the global workplace is challenging. Many managers have an ongoing struggle to build commitment to common goals, align and enforce performance expectations, and navigate personality issues. The global team must establish norms and perceive work and personality styles without the benefit of seeing their team members in their daily routines. Accountability is challenged because most virtual communication lacks the verbal and visual cues that often signify true acknowledgement.

## First Step - Get in Sync

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So where do you start? On the people side, a good place is embracing a dialogue about the personal things we all have in common. We were born to parents and raised in some semblance of a family structure. All of us require some sort of currency-be it monetary or otherwise-to engage in daily activities. We are all educated to varying degrees and typically are required to follow the rules and laws of our respective companies and countries.

Fortunately, increasing numbers of technologies exist to facilitate this dialogue. Ask yourself the following questions to gauge your team's effectiveness using technology:

- ◆ How effectively do you use collaborative websites, message boards, and instant messaging?
- ◆ How clearly defined is your document management structure?
- ◆ Have you developed a communications plan that aligns the particular technological mediums with the type of message conveyed?
- ◆ Do all of your team members have easy access to and the necessary training for these tools?
- ◆ Are you aware of the security risks of these tools so that information does not wind up in the wrong hands?

- ◆ Have you developed appropriate use protocols?
- ◆ When you look at your team's understanding of the processes that enable work to be done, have you clearly identified the hand-offs and touch points with your team members?

When working globally, all of the standard challenges of managing a project in a collocated environment are magnified, creating a strong need for clarity, definition, and consistency in all processes. In addition to your own organizational standards and corporate policies, an awareness of the legal and regulatory requirements of participating countries is needed. How well do your people understand the systems that will enable effective collaboration?

## Remember Mimi's Etiquette

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There are some simple ways to effectively collaborate in the global workplace. The first place to start is etiquette. Not just the normal "please" and "thank you," but what I like to call "Mimi's Etiquette." I do not know if you had the same kind of grandmother as I did, but her advice and style affected me both personally and professionally.

From 1948 to 1965, my grandfather, Allison Graham, had the opportunity to serve on the public relations team of American Export Lines. In his role, he supported the rollout of the steamship passenger liners S.S. Independence and S.S. Constitution, and was instrumental in popularizing air travel on what became TWA. He and my grandmother, "Mimi," explored the world in a day when travel was a luxury reserved for the affluent. Mimi and "Dada" met world leaders, diplomats, and numerous representatives from a myriad of cultures. Going to their home was like a visit to a museum; I was not allowed to touch anything.

As a child, I was annoyed with Mimi enforcing "Emily Post" etiquette on me. She pestered me to behave, act properly, and use good manners ("Otherwise no girl will like you," I still recall her saying to me on many occasions). Today, I am grateful to Mimi for the lessons learned. They serve me well as I collaborate with people from Baltimore to Bangalore.

I mention this personal story to illustrate that the formality of Mimi's etiquette is integral when collaborating with people from different backgrounds and cultures, as her lessons are as applicable today as they were then. The expectation from other cultures that our behavior aligns with some sort of preconceived standard is paramount to establishing a collaborative relationship based upon trust, mutual expectation, and respect. We need to play by agreed-upon social rules and norms. As professionals, we must think about proper etiquette because it affects how people view our organizations and us. The uncertainty and discomfort experienced when working with another culture is challenging. Proper and appropriate etiquette allows us to feel more confident in unfamiliar settings within our own culture and within others'.

## Seek "Global Citizenship"

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Demonstrate to your global partners that you have a genuine desire to learn more about them. What are their work styles, their worldviews, and their family systems? Challenge your perceived biases, generalizations, and stereotypes and seek to gain an understanding from their perspectives. Be patient, listen, and focus on connecting with each other. What do they like about what they do and how can your help make them better? Take advantage of diverse cultures by recognizing that differences do exist. Approach these differences from the viewpoint that diversity will contribute to a better solution. Act like an ambassador.

Break down the barriers to cross cultural communication. Ask yourself what a global citizen would look like? Theoretically, if we break down stereotypes and ethnocentric behaviors, we could take the best each society has to offer and become the best of the best. This sounds utopian, but is a noble goal nonetheless. What characteristics must you demonstrate as a "global role model?" How will you approach your work and your leadership roles differently?

Will we be able to work through our nationalistic differences, equip peripheral countries with adequate resources, and leverage the diversity our planet has to offer? I hope so. One hundred years from now, the technology that will bring us together will make our current capabilities pale in comparison. The time to lay the groundwork for future collaboration is now. Life is challenging for everyone. Be the kind of global partner you seek in others.

## **For Now, Take Time to Share**

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In your team gatherings, set aside time for the team members to share something about themselves and their locale. What do they do for fun? What types of hobbies do the team members have? What is their favorite style of food or favorite restaurant? Perhaps have everyone share something about a local tradition or landmark. What is their history? What does the architecture look like? Encourage people to be virtual tour guides of their cultures and hometowns.

Another way to share is by sharing similar experiences. Challenge each other to become better. Identify skills that would benefit the team and gain agreement the need for improvement. Set team goals and let the team come up with ways to hold each other accountable for making progress. If facilitated team building is not in the budget, play an online game. Almost anything to create a shared mutual experience is a positive step forward. Look for ways to create low risk interactions that build comradery.

Re-visit the ground rules. If your team's time zones are not conducive to meeting during normal business hours, share the burden of getting up in the middle of the night. Utilize technology to enable "face to face" collaboration. Make sure ground rules are mutually agreed upon, not mandated.

Also, ensure roles and responsibilities are fully defined across the virtual team. Clearly document processes, deliverables, and touch points. There is a greater likelihood that work will not be done when people are confused and those who have limited access to information may be at a disadvantage when it comes to team sharing sessions.

## **Reality Check - Am I Collaborating with My Global Team?**

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Here are a few questions you can ask yourself today as a global team "reality check."

Does my team:

- 1) Show respect for differing viewpoints to the extent that cultural differences are leveraged?
- 2) Foster relationships by discovering team member cultural commonalities?
- 3) Agree upon ground rules for professional conduct?

If your answers are yes, then you are probably an effective leader in your global team. Inspire others to do the same. If the answer is no, take some time to reflect on the areas for learning opportunity.

The global workplace is not something that is going to happen; it is something that is here already. How you manage and work within it must be the priorities of an effective global team leader. Look at the resources and abilities of your people, and then look beyond to their cultures and viewpoints. Examine the processes that encompass your work and ensure that team members have the training and technical tools necessary to implement them. Encourage dialogue. Promote communication. And most of all, remember to behave, act properly, and use good manners. Listen to your grandmother (or to mine).

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