Leading international teams

The challenges and competencies of leading virtual and cross-cultural teams

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The challenges of virtual and cross-cultural leadership

In these tough economic times, with much reduced or non-existent travel budgets, there is a greater degree of virtual working in international teams. This presents greater challenges than ever for leaders of international teams.

Building on previous Roffey Park research, Managing Teams Across Cultures (2008) and What makes an excellent virtual manager? (2003), which explore the important foundational skills that managers need in each of these contexts, we set out to investigate what good leadership looks like in international teams – where those cross-cultural and virtual elements co-exist.

We interviewed leaders of international virtual teams who have a strong track record of excellence. We were keen to gain insight into what makes the difference, over and above sound leadership and management skills, in an international, virtual context. What we found supported the findings from our previous research and shone the spotlight on 9 behavioural competencies which high performing leaders of virtual international teams display.

Personal competencies:
- Passion for working internationally
- Energy and resilience.

Interpersonal competencies:
- Flexibility and balance
- Communication
- Influencing
- Involving and valuing individuals.

Management competencies:
- Results focus
- Planning and organisation
- Interface management.

Leading international teams can be rewarding and challenging. The people we spoke with had a clear passion for international working, strong curiosity about local differences and a willingness to learn, even with many years of experience under their belt. We found that leading international teams requires high energy and resilience. The greater degree of virtuality necessitates greater energy, often from the leader, to create and sustain momentum. The many challenges demand highly resilient leaders who are able to value their own achievements.

Leaders of virtual international teams communicate really well and don’t take communication norms for granted. They influence widely, actively involve and value individuals, demonstrate great range and flexibility in their style and combine that with an ability to carefully balance multiple competing needs.
First class management skills are required to create tangible results from a highly distributed team. Planning and organisation offer people a degree of structure to coalesce around. Establishing clear individual accountabilities and keeping the team’s sights firmly set on the ultimate goal are both vital to success. As geographical horizons expand, successful leaders of virtual, international teams are honing their skills in leading across boundaries and managing multiple interfaces.

International teams are often highly complex, compared with single-culture, co-located teams. They also come in many shapes and sizes – highly-matrixed global project teams spanning many individual firms; multi-site, multi-country functional teams; highly-distributed teams of fieldworkers. They may exist to support a variety of strategies for international working, for example to develop or distribute products for a global marketplace, or they may reflect a multi-local set up. This variability demands much more in terms of international leaders in terms of range and flexibility. It also means that the specific context of the international team will determine the emphasis that needs to be placed on each competency and on each indicator within each competency.

Roffey Park works with a number of organisations which are finding themselves increasingly relying on these competencies. We’re always interested to hear the experiences of organisations and individuals working with virtual, intercultural teams, and we offer support in the development of these competencies. So if you’d like further information please contact Alex Swarbrick (alex.swarbrick@roffeypark.com) or Peter Hamill (peter.hamill@roffeypark.com).
Leading International Teams

Competencies for leading teams which are both cross-cultural and virtual

**Personal competencies**

*Passion for international working*
- Relishes the extra challenge and demands of international working
- Displays local curiosity and willingness to continuously learn
- Invests time to understand the cultural context
- Digs deeper to understand others’ less obvious expectations of the leader
- Seeks to understand other local differences (e.g. market, firm and organisational differences)
- Makes an effort with the local language
- Maintains humility and avoids getting blasé about international working

*Energy and resilience*
- Applies high personal energy to create and maintain momentum
- Maintains and replenishes own energy levels
- Perseveres in the face of challenges
- Remains calm in challenging circumstances
- Demonstrates tenacity in follow-up
- Is fast and responsive when people raise issues
- Goes ‘the extra mile’ - does something more than expected to assist team members

**Interpersonal competencies**

*Flexibility and balance*
- Adapts own leadership style to meet a wide range of individual needs
- Appreciates many points of view
- Helps others to value differing points of view
- Is flexible in execution while retaining clarity of purpose
- Balances harmonisation and local needs
- Demonstrates compassion for individual needs in the context of organisational requirements
- Avoids a dogmatic approach and recognises that no ‘one size fits all’

*Communication*
- Communicates, communicates, communicates
- Listens and shows that they are listening
- Checks understanding and doesn’t make assumptions
- Actively manages both content and process in all communication
- Uses a range of different communication methods, as appropriate
- Takes steps to overcome any inequalities in the distribution of information across distributed teams
- Uses language appropriate for an international team
**Influencing**
- Takes extra steps to manage a multiplicity of stakeholders, especially up front
- Continually manages upwards to maintain support
- Builds professional credibility – knows own subject and knows others’ subjects
- Demonstrates the confidence and ability to manage people at more senior levels within the context of the project/team
- Actively selects appropriate influencing style - doesn’t rely on positional power
- Manages interrelationships between ‘home’ and ‘away’ teams, educating each
- Finds ways to be ‘present’ for all parts of the team in a way that each values

**Involving and valuing individuals**
- Strives for local involvement despite the additional challenges this may bring
- Shows genuine interest in the lives and the ‘world’ of remote team members
- Is quick to recognise others’ contributions and give them credit
- Recognises contributions in the way individuals want within the team context
- Develops others’ capacity for remote working (e.g. how they work with you and with colleagues)
- Values own achievements

**Management competencies**

**Results focus**
- Sets own sights on the larger impact
- Ensures that the strategic purpose of the team is well-understood
- Develops ways of working which help people align with the overall purpose
- Creates a sense of team for people to engage with
- Helps team to focus on similarities (e.g. goal/sector) – not just differences
- Ensures that clear accountabilities, outcomes and deliverables are established for individuals within the team
- Keeps team focused on the goal

**Planning and organisation**
- Sets realistic expectations, recognising that things often take more time and effort in international and virtual teams
- Creates structure and process for the team to coalesce around
- Models good project management skills for their team
- Is always well-prepared and manages meetings effectively
- Establishes appropriate ways to manage performance of remote workers
- Ensures people have the basics they need (e.g. information, systems etc.)
- Manages own time to be ‘present’ for all the team

**Interface management**
- Leads across boundaries and manages multiple interfaces, as appropriate
- Manages cross-team relationships effectively - in a multi-local team the leader is often the hub for many spokes
- Builds relationships with key stakeholders (outside the team) across locations
- Actively seeks to be well-connected across the organisation
- Maintains professional credibility
- Develops trusting personal relationships