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Building Collaborative Teams

Working with team members around the world presents challenges that can be overcome by building trust and establishing solid relationships.

How can supply chain practitioners best reap the benefits of global supply chain collaboration? Of course, they need to meet demand and contain costs, but they also have to respond rapidly to change. Supply chains are increasingly complex, with the number of interlinked organizations, facilities, products and customers growing exponentially. That's why supply management professionals and their organizations need to be agile, adaptable and aligned.

While there are many effective technologies to accomplish global collaboration, including impressive synchronous communication tools, the foundation of all human connection is built on trust. Too often, the importance of social factors in collaboration is underestimated. Just because we can move information faster does not mean we improve understanding.

Problems With Dispersed Teams

Recent research has shown that:
• People are two and a half times more likely to have problems with distant colleagues.
• Collaboration is half as effective when done by phone.
• Teamwork is one-third less effective when done via videoconference.
• Globally, only one in five workers reports being "engaged."

Why this dismal performance? One answer is that processes are being used for dispersed teams that are not designed for building relationships. Lack of context is the biggest challenge in global collaboration. When working in the same location, we can observe many cues from our colleagues besides just the words they use. For example, are they overworked, taking worrisome calls and the like? Humans understand communication through environmental cues — audio, visual and physical. These cues are eroded and often eliminated by distance.

Collaboration Iceberg

Global supply chain teams usually establish collaboration processes, but tend to focus mostly on the tip of the iceberg — technology tools and project management procedures.

These are necessary, but they are not sufficient to achieve truly effective collaboration. For example, are you aware that long voicemails may make your colleague in China livid, or that your email to a team member in India may never be read, much less answered?

Unfortunately, high trust and team engagement are not given enough attention when working with supply chain teams around the globe. Transparency and trust are not just nice-to-have attributes. Transparency is necessary to achieve trust, and trust is a force multiplier with powerful economic effects.

Conflict is an inevitable part of team activity. When distance is added to conflict, communication deteriorates and passive-aggressive behavior increases. Compared to face-to-face teams, globally dispersed team members tend to stick more with their initial assessments of colleagues' trustworthiness, whether they are based on initial interactions or stereotypes.

In order to maximize the value of global supply chains, supply chain practitioners need to deliberately help teams work across time and distance. They

need to engineer relationships, meaning they must skillfully plan and manage those interactions. To accomplish this, focus on factors influencing trust and engagement at the base of the iceberg: culture and personal communication style.

Software of the Mind

Culture — the learned differences in thinking, feeling and behavior of people around the globe — can be viewed as the "software of the mind." An understanding of cultural models can help guide supply management practitioners in organizing information, making decisions and understanding colleagues in different parts of the world. A number of useful models have been proposed that address different views on various cultural dimensions, including:

• Acceptance of unequal power distribution
• Individualism versus collectivism
• Priority given quality-of-life issues
• Concerns about the unknown
• Focus on the future versus the present
• Gratification of basic and natural human drives.

Of course, these models can only supply general guidance. No team member exactly represents his or her culture. Teams must possess the ability to recognize cultural differences, but must also develop methods to work with others. "Cultural tuning" provides a broad approach for dealing with misunderstandings by using three rules:

1) Holistic rule. Diverse people should consider the norms of all participants.

2) Synergistic rule. All cultural groups must work together to strengthen relationships.

3) Learning rule. We learn from each interaction, and cultural knowledge only provides some guidelines.

Understanding culture is not about stereotyping, and discussing cultural differences should not be threatening. People are usually proud of their heritage and happy to share general cultural attributes. One way to begin cultural tuning within a team is to present outlines of alternative cultural models for group discussion. Cultural models that describe the effects of a society's culture on the values and behaviors of its members include Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and Fons Trompenaars' Dimensions of Culture.

Hardware of the Mind

While teams must possess the ability to recognize cultural differences, they must also develop methods to work with others as unique individuals. For individual team members, we can think about personal temperament or communication style as "hardware of the mind." Communication style is innate. Many personal communication models identify between four to 16 distinct and commonly observed communication styles. Research suggests about 75 percent of the people around you do not share your communication style. The simplest models identify four fundamental communication styles:

1) **Direct** — bottom-line oriented
2) **Extroverted** — people-oriented
3) **Paced** — collaboration, timing
4) **Structured** — desires information, careful decision-making.

When we want to get somewhere on time, we use maps to find the quickest route and to prevent us from taking wrong turns. So, too, can we improve our ability to "tune in" to individuals — like using GPS to get directions — so we don't get sidetracked. Understanding communication styles doesn't need to be overcomplicated or time-consuming. It typically involves having team members take a brief communication-style survey, then providing some coaching/training.

For example, suppose Martin Planstime (Paced) and Nicole Wantsresults (Direct) have never met and have scheduled a phone call. They can use a web-based communication style program to find tips for working together before the call. They can save considerable time, as well as enjoy the interaction, by knowing that Nicole will probably want the bottom line at the very beginning of the conversation, while Martin will most likely want to discuss the project schedule and collaboration strategy early in the conversation.

Communication-Style Programs

Overnight transformation is not necessary, but getting started is. Look for a collaborative communication program that lends itself to incremental and continuous improvement. Some attributes of a solid program include:

• Simple and transparent (most important)
• Team-focused to increase effective communication versus a primary focus on introspection
• Interactive website with individualized guidance for working with team members
• Easy to understand survey output (written explanation, color coded, graphic and the like)
• Provides additional personalized learning (free surveys for family members)
• Sustainable (easy for new team members to get individualized guidance at any time).

In addition to applying traditional project and process tools at the tip of the iceberg, using neutral platforms such as cultural models and communication-style models can help team members feel less risk as they build trust. This, in turn, accelerates deeper trust and engagement. Globally, organizations that invest the most in relationship management consistently perform better than competitors in the same sector — resulting in 20 percent to 40 percent improvements in service, quality, cost and other performance factors. **ISM**

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